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Riku Nanano

Illustrator
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Second Coming of Shooting Star
and the Final Showdown in
the Eastern Capital





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“Now, let’s put
an end to this
rebellion!”

The great elemental Thunder Fox

Atra

A young girl Allen encountered
in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea.
She guides him deeper into
the ancient tower.

Private tutor to the dukes’ daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate
his own unrivaled control of magic.
He was confined to a ruin but came
face-to-face with an ancient legend
in its depths.

Private Tutor to the 8 Duke’s Daughter





"Hi, Lydia.
I see you've gone
back to your old
hairstyle."

"Unbelievable.
Just completely unbelievable!
You're such a fool, Allen."

The image depicts three anime-style characters in a dynamic, magical setting. On the left, a large, flowing banner of red and blue streaks dominates the upper portion of the frame. In the center-right, three characters are shown: a girl with red hair and a surprised expression, a boy with brown hair and a determined look, and a girl with white hair and a blue bow, who appears to be casting a spell. They are surrounded by glowing purple and white energy. In the background, a large, intricate circular diagram, resembling a magical circle or a clock face with various symbols, is visible. The overall atmosphere is one of intense magical action.

“Enough!”

Streaks of scarlet and
azure mingled with Lightning Flash,
magnifying its power by orders of magnitude.
Our spell tore through Lev's ashen ray...
and struck him!

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???

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Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters/
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

ALLEN

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella's private tutor possesses an extraordinary command of magic, although he remains oblivious to his talents.



Royal Academy
student council vice president

CAREN

Allen's younger sister by adoption is levelheaded but surprisingly needy. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.

»...»...»...» Ducal House of Howard,
northernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms <...<...<...<



Duke Howard's
second daughter

TINA HOWARD

After her talents blossomed thanks to Allen's tutoring, this young lady placed first on her Royal Academy entrance exam.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter/
Royal Academy
student council president

STELLA HOWARD

Tina's serious and hardworking elder sister is the heir to the Dukedom of Howard.



Tina's personal maid

ELLIE WALKER

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

»...»...»...» Ducal House of Leinster,
southernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms <...<...<...<



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter/
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

Allen's highborn partner is a loose cannon, but she's also the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman.



Duke Leinster's
second daughter

LYNNE LEINSTER

Lydia's younger sister placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exam. She sees Tina, who placed first, as a rival.

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Prologue

“Fresh tidings! Friendly forces under Earl Sandré have safely retreated from the northern suburbs.”

“Earl Sulame and his forces have completed their retreat from the southern suburbs! They are currently at rest.”

“Earl Sven’s command has yet to return from their westward foray—possibly delayed by stormy weather.”

“Supply management at Central Station is improving.”

“Train tracks and other infrastructure between the royal and eastern capitals are under repair. The frequency of shipments is expected to decrease.”

The Algren residence in the royal capital was abuzz with reports. Though it was after midnight, knights and runners bearing news still streamed into our council hall. And while we were tracking troop movements on a table in the center of the room, using glass pieces and a map of the city, my people were scrambling to keep up with the sheer volume of information. What would they do without me—Greck Algren?!

“Grant ought to thank me. Here I am, holding the city while, back east, he struggles to take the Great Tree from a pack of animals,” I groused, lounging on the throne I’d taken from the ruins of the royal palace. To the newly arrived knights, I said reprovingly, “Thank you for your reports. But you have made one error—our withdrawal from the outlying towns is *not* a ‘retreat.’”

That seemed to baffle everyone in the room.

Imbeciles! How can they fail to see something so simple?!

“This is merely a strategic redeployment,” I continued with dignity, careful not to let my anger show. “We will resume our advance as soon as our supply issues are sorted out. Look at the facts: we have lost not a single soldier. Is this not so?”

A chorus of belated adulation filled the room.

“Quite true, Your Highness.”

“Your Highness sees clearly to the heart of the matter.”

“How fresh Your Highness’s outlook is! No wonder you dealt the palace garrison its first ever defeat!”

I crossed my legs and basked in the shower of praise. For the moment, I remained merely “His Highness, Lord Algren,” but I was destined for more. I had no designs on my elder brother, Duke Grant

Algren. Still, I was the man who had taken the royal capital. When the war was over, my martial glory would surely merit a new dukedom—perhaps even the continent’s first *grand* dukedom in centuries.

More than a month had already passed since we had launched the Great Cause—our rebellion against the Royal House of Wainwright, which had spent the past several years scheming to strip the aristocracy of its sacred rights under the guise of “meritocracy.” The eastern capital’s Great Tree still defied us, and we had failed to capture the royal family due to the fierce resistance of their knights and bodyguards. Yet despite these minor hiccups, the war as a whole had gone much according to plan.

I stood and surveyed the map. “Raymond, what of the two eastern marquesses?” I asked. “If they sided with us, we could solve our supply problems with a single stroke and cease worrying about unreliable railways.”

A light-blond fellow—my right-hand man, Earl Raymond Dispenser—stepped forward from his unobtrusive place beside me and shook his head. “I’m afraid we’ve made no headway with them,” he said, pointing to a spot on the map between the royal and eastern capitals. “I’ve dispatched messengers almost daily, but Marquesses Gardner and Crom continue to reserve their responses. By joining in the negotiations myself, however, I obtained their pledges to resume provisioning the royal capital. According to reports I’ve received, the first shipment has already departed their lands.”

“Indeed? Well done!” I cried, clapping Raymond on his right shoulder.

The original plan had called for us to pivot immediately after capturing the royal capital and march on either the northern Howards or the southern Leinsters while the former was still occupied with the Yustinian Empire and the latter, with the League of Principalities. We had hoped to pick them off while they were divided and distracted, yet our supply trains from the eastern capital had fallen behind schedule—due in part to the devious machinations of enemy saboteurs. And owing to canards spread by the impudent Torettos, the city’s major merchant houses had proved stubbornly uncooperative. As a result, our supply lines had become unreliable, leaving me with no choice but to redeploy the troops I had sent into the outlying settlements north, south, and west of the capital. I had left lookouts to ensure that we need not fear being taken unawares, even in the unlikely event that the Howards or Leinsters attempted a counterattack. Even so, it had not been a pleasant decision.

“Your Highness honors me,” Raymond said, bowing. “Although the most powerful merchants refuse us their aid, many smaller firms have offered their services. And the former Earl Rupert is presently

engaged in recruiting more, along with the man I appointed to organize their efforts, Ernest Fosse. We have also transported a wealth of supplies from the outlying towns. Once the marquesses' support is added to it, we should hear no more complaints from the people of the capital."

"Excellent," I said. The city dwellers engaged in no open resistance, but neither were they well-disposed toward us. The lowborn rabble was incapable of appreciating our lofty, patriotic spirit. Yet they would fall into line—once we favored them with food and the gold it inevitably generated.

Turning back to Raymond, I continued, "As soon as our supply lines are in order—"

Before I could finish outlining my intention to reoccupy the surrounding towns, a bearded knight clanked into the hall. It must have been raining, because the armored man was soaked through, and his hands and feet were caked in mud.

"Forgive me, Your Highness!" he cried. "I bring urgent news!"

"Control yourself, Viscount," I said stiffly, eyeing the newcomer with a cold disdain shared by every other noble and knight present. "I believe I ordered you to transport arms to the western suburbs."

This man, Zad Belgique by name, was an Algren vassal known throughout the east of the kingdom as a monster slayer. His fame, however, had not survived the early days of the Great Cause. During our conquest of the city, I had assigned him to mop up stragglers fleeing south, yet he and his men had disgraced themselves by falling into enemy hands. And who had captured him? "I remember engaging Leinster and Howard maids," he had claimed, "but nothing more." Ludicrous! He could at least have told a more convincing lie. Only the opposition of the old grand knight Haag Harclay, who had since led our elite Violet Order back to the eastern capital, had stopped me from disciplining Belgique on the spot. It appeared that my leniency had been misguided.

The viscount endured my gaze. I wondered why he was so pale as he strode to the center of the hall.

"The Ducal House of Lebufera is on the march!" he shouted, slamming his fist down on the west side of the city map. "I fear the western suburbs have already fallen!"

For a moment, stunned silence filled the hall. The House of Lebufera held one of our kingdom's Four Great Dukedoms and governed its western provinces. For two centuries, it had faced down the demons—archenemies of the human race—across the continent's largest waterway, Blood River. If the Lebuferas entered the war, bringing the rest of the western aristocracy and nonhuman peoples with them, the Dark Lord's armies might seize the opportunity to

resume their eastward march.

I shared a look with Raymond, then burst out laughing. "Ha!" I scoffed. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Belgique?!"

"Viscount," said Raymond, "have you come to sow chaos? To betray the generosity His Highness showed you after your miserable blunder? If so..." He gripped the hilt of the dagger he wore at his belt, and my guard of knights likewise prepared for combat.

"Nonsense!" Belgique pleaded, grimacing and shaking his head. "Sir, I swear that I speak the truth! Amid the driving wind and rain, my men and I saw wyverns blanketing the skies above the city! A flash of lightning revealed a giant, toppling a bell tower at a stroke! Dwarves burst from fresh holes in the ramparts! And fluttering from atop the parapet, a great, timeworn standard emblazoned with a star! Earl Sven and his forces are surely lost!"

"And did you capture this spectacle on a video orb?"

"W-Well..." The bearded viscount clenched his fists and lowered his gaze. "No, sir. We retreated immediately and had no time."

I sighed and motioned to my guards. "Enough. You must have hallucinated, recalling your time in captivity. I hereby relieve you of duty. Stand by in the capital with your men. Tell no one what you have just told me. If you breathe so much as a word...you won't find clemency a third time."

"Sir! Please, I—"

"Take him away!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

When Belgique saw my guards closing in, he shook himself and departed, muttering, "What's the use?"

Good riddance. My army has no place for those who undermine its discipline.

"Gentlemen, do not let baseless rumors sway you," I said boldly, sweeping my gaze over the hall. "The west will do nothing. We face only the Howards in the north and the Leinsters in the south. Once Earl Sven and our remaining officers return, I shall convene a council of war. Victory is within our grasp, and we need only resolve our supply difficulties to seize it. Greck Algren expects much from your martial valor!"

"Long live His Highness, Lord Greck Algren, the greatest general of the age!" my officers cheered.

Morale is high. With such motivated troops, our victory is all but certain!

Swelling with satisfaction, I glanced out the window. Heavy clouds obscured the western sky, suggesting that the storm was still raging. Some delay in our western detachment's return seemed inevitable.



"It's hopeless. Unless something changes, the people of the capital will starve," I groaned despondently, facing the papers piled high on my massive desk in a room of the Algren mansion. It was the dead of night, the army had just abandoned the nearby towns, and I had no fellow merchants to turn to—they were all napping, worn out by weeks of brutal, unrelenting work.

I took another look at the papers. The royal capital produced nothing but water. Without supply shipments, it would inevitably—

A group of men entered without knocking. All but two wore hooded gray robes.

"Working late, I see, Ernest," said one. "We appreciate it."

Haltingly, I looked up. "My lord."

The man who had spoken was Earl Raymond Despenser—the one who had forced this job on me. And although I was used to seeing him in uniform, this evening, he wore a white sorcerer's robe with crimson trim.

Next to him stood a fat, balding, middle-aged man dressed like a knight, in dark green, with a sword belted at his waist—the former Earl Rupert. This disgraced nobleman had persistently offered to invest in my family business, the Fosse Company.

"You look like you're having a hard time of it," he said, laughing loudly. "But not for much longer—there's light at the end of the tunnel."

"D-Do you mean you'll free my daughter, Felicia?!" I demanded, bolting to my feet and filling the air with papers on which I'd calculated the royal capital's desperate shortage of just about everything.

In the beginning, I'd assumed this rebellion had nothing to do with me. My family's roots were in the west, and I doubted that the Ducal House of Lebufera and its vassals would join the fight. Still, the rebel army had seemed destined to fail. No merchant backs a losing horse, so my first move had been to get my wife and workers out of the city. Then I'd set off to find my puddingheaded daughter Felicia, who had quit the Royal Academy without my permission and run away from home. But waiting for me at Allen & Co., I had found Earl Despenser, Rupert, and a gaggle of shady characters in gray robes.

Before I could get my bearings, the earl had announced, "Your daughter is in my keeping, Mr. Fosse. I would appreciate your cooperation. The rebel army will soon struggle to supply itself, and it can expect no help from the great merchant houses. Nevertheless, we need time—the rebels must hold out until our work is done. See that they do, and in the name of the Saint and the Holy Spirit, I swear I

will return your daughter safe and sound.”

I didn’t know if Felicia was really his prisoner. He might have been lying through his teeth. But what if he wasn’t? I couldn’t refuse. Ever since, I had joined the other merchants assisting the rebel army—whatever their private opinions might be—and the logistics officers serving the Ducal House of Algren and its vassals in the mad scramble for supplies.

“Yes,” Earl Despensar confirmed, with a smile on his lips, “our work is nearly finished.”

“We’ve gained all we needed!” added Rupert.

“Th-Then—”

“I sincerely appreciate your efforts, Ernest.” The earl ignored my question and sat down in a nearby chair. Then he crossed his legs and looked at me. “Most of the lesser merchants will surely be pardoned after the rebellion is quashed. But not you, I fear. Your name is on too many documents to escape punishment.”

“Wh-What?! I...I only helped you because you threatened to—”

I lunged at the earl, only to be brought up short by a sword at my throat. Rupert had drawn his blade faster than my eyes could follow. A moment later, I heard his gold-chain necklace jingle.

“Masterful!” the earl said, clapping. “The Ruperts’ reputation for swordplay is well deserved. No wonder your ancestors were such well-respected Lebufera vassals before the War of the Dark Lord. But please, sheathe your blade.”

Rupert laughed. “The Lebuferas are fit only for destruction. They lack faith in the Holy Spirit, and they’ve spent two centuries meddling in my house’s business.” His eyes flashed with a mad gleam as, with a practiced motion, he returned his sword to its scabbard. I sank to the floor in an ungainly heap.

“I have news for you,” the earl said, smiling. “I’m unclear on the particulars, but the Lebuferas have joined the war, and intelligence suggests the western suburbs have fallen. The Howards and Leinsters are likely within hailing distance of the city as well. Marquesses Crom and Gardner, meanwhile, have already given us up as a lost cause.”

I let out an inarticulate cry, stunned—as any westerner would be. The Lebuferas had been immovable since the War of the Dark Lord. And the other ducal houses were already right on our doorstep!

The earl took a wooden icon from the neck of his robe and squeezed it. “She whom I serve has foreseen this eventuality,” he said with a look of ecstasy. “With your aid, we have succeeded in removing the most essential objects of her desire from the palace archive of forbidden books, the second sealed treasury, the Royal Academy’s Great Tree, and the cemetery beneath it, and we have transported a portion of them to those in the eastern capital. Thank

you. You have my gratitude.” He bowed low, then Rupert and the gray robes followed his example.

The earl and his underlings had been plundering all sorts of things from all over the city. Most had been heavily secured curios whose uses I couldn’t begin to guess. The only ones I’d gotten a good look at were a pair of small boxes plastered in talismans that he’d sent to the eastern capital by griffin. They had been labeled “monster, Stinging Sea: heart fragment” and “Great Tree, royal capital: most ancient bud.”

“Th-Then let my daughter go!” I forced myself to shout, although I was quaking with fear. “I beg of you! Please...Please, free Felicia!”

“As for your daughter, you have my solemn word,” the earl answered. “But I must ask you to accompany us—to the Lalannoy Republic.”

“L-Lalannoy?!” I echoed, unable to believe my ears. The republic lay northeast of the kingdom, across the continent’s largest salt lake, the Four Heroes Sea.

The earl stood up. Thunder rumbled. His robe billowed. “Mr. Ernest Fosse, you will do nicely.”

“F-For what?” I hardly dared to ask.

“You aren’t part of *his* inner circle, yet he can’t turn a blind eye to your predicament. Truly, you are just the man I need. Well then, until we meet again in Lalannoy. I must babysit the little lordling for a few days more.”

“Wh-What the blazes do you— St-Stop!” Without warning, a charcoal-gray magic circle appeared on the floor, and I started sinking into it. I struggled for all I was worth, but I kept falling. While I was up to my neck in darkness, I saw Rupert and the gray robes go down on one knee and bow reverently to the earl.

“Apostle Ibush-nur, what is to follow?” asked the man in green.

“Whatever Her Holiness wills. If all goes well, our work will cause the Lady of the Sword’s fall and throw the kingdom into chaos. If Junior Apostle Lev’s faith holds strong, even the eastern capital’s Great Tree may yet be ours.”

Chapter 1

“Good work, everyone. The town of Fouha is now fully under our control. The bulk of the rebel forces appear to have withdrawn due to logistical concerns,” announced my dear mother, the Bloodstained Lady, Duchess Lisa Leinster. How dignified she looked, standing there in her deep-scarlet uniform and cap. “See that the townspeople are well cared for, and send to the southern capital for anything they lack. My husband Liam has already left to confer with his sworn friend, Duke Walter Howard.”

The assembled officers let out a cheer.

“So far, so good, Lady Lynne,” the buxom beauty beside me whispered cheerily. Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three, wore a black ribbon in her lovely, long scarlet hair, a jacket with a design of interlocking arrows, a long skirt, and a pair of leather boots.

“Yes,” I whispered back, “but we haven’t a moment to lose.”

We were just south of the royal capital, in the council chamber of Fouha’s town hall. Through the cracked windowpanes, I could see dark, lowering clouds. A little less than a month had passed since the Ducal House of Algren had led our kingdom’s conservative aristocracy in an insurrection. Rebel sympathizers in the League of Principalities had taken the opportunity to invade, but we Leinsters and our southern vassals had repelled their attack and crushed their army on the Avasiek Plain. Our main force had then pivoted toward the royal capital, and our march had brought us here.

This gathering consisted of the most prominent southern nobles and commanders, along with Lily, myself, and a handful of knights. Seeing that my dear mother’s speech had ignited their courage, I clenched my fists along with them.

My dear father was off to confer with Duke Walter—meaning that Howard forces were nearing the capital as well! My mind went to Tina Howard and Ellie Walker, whom I felt certain were marching with the army. They would never consent to stay behind in the northern capital, especially not now that my dear brother—our private tutor and the irreplaceable Brain of the Lady of the Sword—had become embroiled in this insurrection.

Tina, Ellie, I can’t wait to see you. I have so much to tell you about—

A sudden poke on my cheek derailed my train of thought. I nearly cried out but managed to gag myself with my hands. I was the

daughter of a duke, after all, and I did have some sense of shame.

"Lily, what's the big idea?" I whispered in high dudgeon.

"You looked so happy I couldn't help myself," the maid gleefully whispered back. "You've been a little down since you said goodbye to Sida in the southern capital."

Sida was a maid in training who had been assigned to wait on me over summer vacation. She was a nice girl—albeit with a touch of eccentricity—but I could hardly take her with me on campaign, so I had left her behind. Perhaps her presence had helped to ease my loneliness during these trying times.

A knight in flamboyant scarlet armor—Earl Tobias Evelyn, commander of our elite Scarlet Order—raised his hand in an enthusiastic salute and cried, "Ma'am, let my knights and me lead the charge into the royal capital!"

A chorus of objections followed.

"Lord Evelyn is too eager for the limelight. My own House of Pozon would be a better choice."

"The House of Hugues awaits your order."

"The House of Bor is ready and willing!"

My dear mother smiled elegantly. But before she could speak, another voice said, "I beg your pardon." A knock followed, then in stepped a stunning bespectacled woman with black hair and dark skin—the Leinster Maid Corps's second-in-command, Romy. She had brought another maid with longish ears, skin a little on the dark side, and extremely pale scarlet hair tied loosely behind her head—not to mention a chest that made its presence felt despite the battle-stained breastplate she wore.

"Celenissa! You're back from the eastern capital?!" I cried. The second maid, Celenissa Ceynoth, was the corps's number five. She had accompanied our head maid, Anna, to the rebels' eastern stronghold, where they had proposed to conduct reconnaissance in force.

My dear mother serenely raised her left hand, instantly silencing the din of voices. "Romy," she said, inviting a report.

"Yes, mistress," Romy responded. "First, the Ducal House of Howard has captured the town of Nanoff, to the north of the royal capital. And due to the lightning swiftness with which they took the rebels unawares, I believe no word of the attack has reached the city."

The whole group met this news with looks of approbation. As we'd hoped, the Howards were matching us stride for stride.

"Next, I have startling news to relate. You see..." The second-in-command faltered.

"Romy's in a tizzy," Lily murmured liltingly.

At last, Romy adjusted her spectacles with one hand and announced, "The towns west of the capital seem to have been retaken

as well—and by the Ducal House of Lebufera.”

A shocked commotion filled the chamber. Even my dear mother was wide-eyed.

The Ducal House of Lebufera guarded the west of our kingdom. And for the past two hundred years, they had been glued to the line of forts they had built on the banks of Blood River, locked in a staring contest with our demonic nemeses. Yet those same Lebuferas had marched to war. I shivered, certain that I was witnessing a grand event which would go down in the annals of—

My dear mother clapped her hands. “We’ll ignore the matter of the Lebuferas for the present,” she said. “Romy, I trust you’ve informed Liam?”

“Yes, mistress. The master sends word to you: ‘We will move our conference west, and three dukes will attend.’”

“I see.”

Again, the officers were taken aback. Their faces flushed, and, without thinking, they clenched their fists and rapped on their scabbards and armor. Three of our kingdom’s Four Great Dukes had gathered on the battlefield for a council of war.

This is amazing. Simply stupendous! Nothing like it has happened since the War of the Dark Lord. Now rescuing my dear brother should be—

Celenissa gave my dear mother a meaningful look.

“The battle for the royal capital will begin immediately upon Liam’s return. You are all to rest in the meantime,” commanded Duchess Lisa Leinster. “Lynne, Lily, stay with me. Romy, Celenissa, fetch Lydia—and see that Maya accompanies her.”



“Dear mother, is it, um...wise to tell my dear sister fresh news of the eastern capital—and of my dear brother?” I asked frankly once the others had left the room.

“I can’t pretend it is,” my dear mother replied, folding her arms and frowning, “but I don’t have the heart to hide it from Lydia now.”

I had nothing to say to that; my dear sister was desperate for any word of my dear brother. But if...if Celenissa’s news was bad—

Lily softly squeezed my hands and said, “Allen is strong, Lady Lynne.”

“Lily...” My unease got the better of me, and I hugged the maid like I had when I was little. She tenderly stroked my back.

Yet mana was approaching—powerful, turbulent, and horribly unstable. I stepped away from Lily and stood up straight as the door opened to admit Romy and Celenissa, both carrying a chair. Then a petite, chestnut-brown-haired woman in a maid uniform entered, supporting a haggard young woman with close-cropped scarlet hair.

The latter wore a jet-black military uniform, her eyes gleamed with a dull light, and the charred scarlet ribbon on her right wrist was beginning to fall apart. Lily and I froze, stunned by our first sight of her in days.

“Dear sister.”

“Lydia.”

This young woman was Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, whom some hailed as the kingdom’s mightiest sorceress and swordswoman. She was also my dear sister, and I idolized her.

She murmured, “Thank you, Maya. I can walk on my own.” Then she strode up to our dear mother, and her tone turned suddenly sharp. “I take it you have news of him, mother?”

“Have you been eating enough, Lydia?” our dear mother asked slowly. “You look in no condition to—”

“Enough about me. Nothing matters more than him now.”

“Lydia.” Anguish twisted our dear mother’s face. Quietly, Romy and Celenissa set down their chair. “Sit down. Please.”

My dear sister granted her heartfelt plea in silence. Maya and Romy swiftly took up positions behind her.

Our dear mother sat as well and said, “Celenissa, tell us what’s happening in the eastern capital. And try to be brief.”

“Yes, mistress.” The maid bobbed her head. As the second eldest of the three Ceynoth sisters, her lovely features showed a trace of elvish blood.

My dear sister put her hands together as if in prayer. *She would never have shown weakness like this before*, I thought, clenching my fist to my chest against the pain.

“I will confine my report to the essentials,” Celenissa said calmly, then launched into her account of the war.

“I see. The Great Tree is still holding out, then? And Richard is wounded but safe?”

“Yes, mistress. Miss Caren succeeded in destroying the impregnable Great Bridge, and the tree itself is guarded by a flock of sea-green griffins under the command of the legendary Shooting Star’s former mount. And since the head maid, Nico, and Jean also remained behind for defense and reconnaissance, I believe the danger has passed for the time being.”

My dear mother smiled, evidently relieved by the report. “Richard is certainly a handful—he always picks the most trying times to test his limits! I wonder whom he got that from. What do you think, Lynne?”

“W-Well...” I laughed awkwardly. I mean, while my dear brother Richard spent most of his time playing the fool, deep down he was as

impossibly earnest as our dear father. But be that as it may, this news offered far brighter prospects than Sir Ryan Bor's initial report.

And the beastfolk chose Caren to journey west and invoke the Old Pledge. Imagine that! I thought, picturing the Royal Academy student council's brother-loving, wolf-clan vice president. *If the Lebuferas have joined the fight, she might be marching with them.*

"And he's a prisoner of war?" my dear sister pressed Celenissa. "He isn't dead? You're absolutely certain?"

"The enemy general Haig Hayden said so," the maid replied. "Though a rebel, he is a grand knight—I believe we may take him at his word."

"He's alive," my dear sister murmured haltingly as tears welled from her eyes. Lily and I rushed to her side, calling softly to her, and clasped her hands. They were cold and emaciated.

My dear mother rose too and dried my dear sister's eyes with a handkerchief. "Lydia, Allen is alive. But he'd have a fright if he saw you now. Give your mind and body some rest. Maya, Romy."

"Yes, mistress. Lady Lydia."

"Please excuse us."

The two maids lifted my dear sister, who was touching the handkerchief and murmuring, "Alive. He's alive." Lily and I moved to join them, but my dear mother stopped us with a look.

What?

As soon as my dear sister was out of the room, nearly a hundred sound-dampening spells and barriers encircled it. Was this Maya and Romy's magic?!

I turned to look at my dear, solemn-faced mother and the remaining maid. Then it struck me—Celenissa had lied to protect my dear sister's careworn heart.

"Please," I said, meeting the maid's mournful gaze, "tell me the truth."

A moment of silence followed. Then Celenissa replied, "According to Hayden's word and other intelligence we gathered in the eastern capital, Mr. Allen was indeed taken prisoner. However, he was subsequently abducted and sent to the Four Heroes Sea by a group other than the rebel forces."

"They took my dear brother?!" I exclaimed, shaken.

"Abducted? Who would know the details?" Lily asked. She spoke calmly, but her hands were trembling.

Celenissa lowered her gaze. "Perhaps the enemy leader, Grant Algren, or his brother Greck, who commands their forces in the royal capital. But if the rebels we captured are to be believed, Mr. Allen's valor earned him a reputation even among the insurrectionists and the eastern capital's human population. I doubt they would use him

roughly.”

“Then who on earth could have—”

I allowed my own question to trail off, unfinished. I had a fairly good head on my shoulders, and it had just recalled the menace we’d encountered at Avasiek—the Church of the Holy Spirit’s inquisitors. In my shock, I could practically hear the blood drain from my face.

“Mistress!” Lily shouted. “Romy and Maya can’t leave Lady Lydia’s side, but please—give me, Celenissa, and the other ranking maids permission to go to the eastern capital! Unless we do something —”

My dear mother clapped a hand over my cousin’s mouth and shushed her.

What does she mean? Why must Romy and Maya stay with my dear sister?

My dear mother incinerated the handkerchief with which she’d wiped my dear sister’s tears. “Lydia outfoxed us,” she groaned. “She was eavesdropping. That isn’t normally her way, but she has no scruples where Allen is concerned. I suppose she *is* my daughter.”

“Dear mother...”

“Mistress...”

“Lynne, Lily, Celenissa.”

All three of us responded with a belated “Yes, ma’am.”

My dear mother rose to her feet and said, “In Duke Liam Leinster’s stead, I command you: return the Lady of the Sword to the southern capital immediately. If she fights in her present state of mind, she might well pose a threat to friend and foe alike. If she resists...” She gently touched her scabbard, and I saw sorrow in her eyes. “You may handle her roughly. If the worst happens, I will face her myself. I’m the only mother that girl has.”



We went straight from the council chamber to the room allotted to my dear sister.

“So, my dear sister was always surrounded by Maya and officers of the maid corps as insurance? Were you informed of this?” I demanded as we walked.

“No one told me anything,” my cousin grumbled forlornly. “I just thought it was a little odd. I should’ve known they still didn’t really trust me as a maid, even though I made it to number three.”

“No whining, ma’am,” Celenissa interjected from behind us, giving Lily a gentle rap on the head.

“Ow! C-Celenissa, that huuurt!” Lily made a show of cradling her wound.

“What are we to do with you?” Without breaking stride, the older

maid planted her left hand on her hip and pointed with her right index finger. “You’re one of us—unless you’d rather be demoted back to a trainee?”

“Th-Then how come you never let me have a maid uniform?” Lily whined, fidgeting with her index fingers pressed together. Celenissa regarded her with unconcealed affection.

Suddenly, I recalled a lesson from the notebook that my dear brother had given me. “You’ll grow strong, Lynne,” it had said. “But that’s all the more reason why you must never forget to be kind and considerate to others.” I pressed my right hand to my heart.

I can't help feeling frightened of my dear sister right now. But letting her go on like this isn't right. I must stop her! I am Lynne Leinster, sister of Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and pupil of Allen, her Brain!

Both my cousin and the solicitous maid turned to stare at me.

“Lady Lynne?”

“Is something the matter?”

“It’s nothing—I’ve merely steeled my resolve,” I said, with an airy wave of my right hand. Then I called to the two maids conversing at the end of the corridor. “Maya, Romy. My dear mother has commanded us to return my dear sister to the southern capital, although I would rather not be rough with her.”

Maya looked surprised, but she said, “Yes, my lady.”

“Lady Lydia’s mana hasn’t budged,” added the corps’s second-in-command, with a nod of understanding. “You should find her in her quarters.”

“Let’s make certain.” While the maids hung back, I knocked softly on the door and called, “Dear sister, it’s me, Lynne. I’m coming in.”

She made no reply. I felt a sinking in my chest.

She can't have.

I opened the door and stepped...into an empty room.

Out the open window, I could see dark clouds toward the royal capital but no hint of the moon or stars. A black hair clip, which doubled as a video and communication orb, lay carelessly discarded on the bed, and a spare sword leaned against a chair.

Lily frowned. “Don’t tell me Lydia...”

Maya strode to the window and cast a detection spell. “The mana we sensed earlier must have been a decoy,” she murmured mournfully. “Oh, Lady Lydia.”

What do I do? What should I do? What can I do?

My dear brother wasn’t here. Neither were Tina, Ellie, Lady Stella, Caren, or Felicia. And time was of the essence, if my dear sister’s gauntness was anything to go by. I had to make a decision.

I seized the abandoned sword, then wheeled round and said, “Maya, report to my dear mother at once! I have no doubt my dear

sister has gone off alone...to get my dear brother's whereabouts from the enemy commander. Celenissa, inform my dear father."

Both maids were somewhat shaken, but they acknowledged my commands.

"Y-Yes, my lady."

"And what will you do, Lady Lynne?"

"That should be obvious." I adjusted my military cap, slid my dear sister's sword into my belt, and took a deep breath.

Dear brother, please, give me courage!

"I'll pursue my dear sister! My dear mother charged Lily and me to be her scabbard while my dear brother is away. Romy, please accompany us!"





Lebufera banners flew atop a nameless hill west of the royal capital, as did those of their vassals. Humans, elves, dwarves, dragonfolk, giants, demisprites, and other races besides milled about their main encampment. Morale was sky-high—as it ought to be, after they had annihilated an enemy force under Earl Sven and seized the outlying townships in a surprise attack a few days earlier.

“This way, Your Highness,” said my guide, an elven officer.

“Thank you,” I replied and stepped past him into the conference pavilion.

A deep voice boomed, “You’re late, Liam! Is the league such a pushover that you’ve lost your edge? It’s been ages since I last saw you in uniform. Yes, you always did look good in red.” A large, burly, bearded man with platinum hair and an azure uniform raised his left hand in greeting without rising from his seat. This was my old friend for good and ill, Walter Howard, one of the Four Great Dukes and ruler of the north.

“You’re just early, Walter,” I replied, sinking into an empty chair. “Or should I say ‘Wolf of the North’? Was wiping the floor with the Yustinians’ southern army not enough for you?”

“Oh, that? Child’s play,” bragged the “god of war,” setting down his cup of black tea and a handful of papers. “Here’s a souvenir for you—although these aren’t as accurate as they were near the northern capital.”

I nodded and picked up the papers, which turned out to be weather forecasts for the royal capital and its neighboring regions. “Where did you get these?” I asked.

“My daughter Tina made them,” said Walter, a smile breaking through his stern expression.

“They’re...magnificent.”

I *had* heard she was as brilliant as Lydia, I reflected, sipping my tea. The leaves were a new western variety. Then I set down my cup and withdrew my cigarette case—a gift that my son Richard had purchased with his first wages from the royal guard.

That foolish boy is too earnest for his own good. I’ll wager he’s risking his neck in the eastern capital. As Duke Leinster, I ought to commend him. But as his father, I merely wish for his survival.

I grinned ruefully, recalling that the friend sitting across from me had become a father as well. Only the professor never changed.

“Can I tempt you?” I asked, producing two cigarettes and offering one to Walter.

“Yes, thank you.”

I lit the cigarettes with a spell, and we sat silently for a little while, wreathed in smoke.

At length, I said, "Was it wise to bring little Tina on campaign?"

"For now," Walter replied, looking grave. "I tried to stop my daughters, but they both insisted they'd march straight to the eastern capital if I ordered them to stay in the north. I consulted the professor, and he approves." After a slight pause, he added, "You must have received an urgent message too. One of the Ceynoth girls brought us a ribbon from him."

"I see." I incinerated what remained of my cigarette and let my head droop listlessly.

"Lydia must be in a bad way if you're looking like that," my friend said with evident concern. We both had cursed children for daughters—two at one time, and in the same country!

"She is," I admitted. "Lisa fears the worst."

Walter burned up the last of his cigarette as well. "As bad as that?" he asked gravely.

"As bad as that."

Walter folded his arms, sighed heavily, and grumbled, "We need him alive, no matter what it takes."

"My house is deeply in his debt too. We can't let him die on us. And above all..." I recalled my little girl as I'd seen her after Avasiek, sleeping in a corner of a pavilion with her swords in her arms. "I can't see Lydia looking so haggard without wanting to do something about it. My daughter *needs* Allen. Walter, when this war is over, I'm going to elevate that boy, even if I have to drag him kicking and screaming. Are you with me?"

"The war hasn't started yet. We can talk about what comes next *after* we've won it," the war god grumbled, with the conflicted look of one contemplating a losing battle. "Stella and Tina are deeply attached to him too. And Graham said much the same thing you just did. The Walkers may well steal a march on us if we're not careful."

"Quite a thorny problem."

So, the Walkers are angling for Allen too.

"Allen has my gratitude," Walter growled sullenly, "but he won't have my daughters' hands in marriage!"

"Walter, I took the same stance four years ago, and I've been losing ground ever since. Give up."

"Never!" Walter took a moment to calm himself. Then he asked, "And what of the south? I'm told you have the upper hand."

He had news of our battles with the league while he was in the north? Walker the Abyss is a force to be reckoned with.

"Our war griffins proved more effective than I'd imagined," I replied. "Then there's that merchant girl we hired. On Anna's

recommendation, I invested her with Allen's full wartime authority."

"Felicia Fosse? How did she perform?"

"You have to ask? Allen scouted her, and our head maid vouched for her," I said, recalling the bespectacled girl's staggering military achievements. "My father-in-law has taken quite a shine to her as well. Still, pairing her with Sykes's girl might have been a mistake. Their exploits have our hard-liners demanding we annex Atlas and Bazel, at the least."

Earl Sykes's daughter, Sasha, came from a long line of gifted spymasters. At her young age, her talent for espionage and stratagems already inspired her father's predecessor with awe. She was also Richard's fiancée.

"You never change." Walter gave an exaggerated shake of his head. "You and the Leinsters always overdo it!"

"Humph. And how have you fared?"

"We've already reached a secret agreement with the old man to our north—a white peace, essentially. Negotiations went smoothly. The professor was in charge, and our prisoners of war included the imperial crown prince and one of their princesses."

"How is that fair?! You should have sent the professor south as soon as he was done!"

"The deal is struck, but he'll be busy for a while yet. Our affairs may be in order, but theirs aren't."

I studied my old friend's expression.

So, old Emperor Yustin has seized his chance to do a bit of domestic "housecleaning."

"At Rostlay, Stella and the Hero battled an agent of the Church of the Holy Spirit," Walter announced coldly. "The enemy used spell-soldiers, dragon bones, and Resurrection. In the end, she even resorted to the taboo spell Reverie of Restless Revenants."

"The Hero?!" I echoed, disbelieving.

"She's still with my forces, chatting happily with Stella and Tina." Heavily, he added, "I believe she's here for your daughter."

The church was moving behind the scenes. Spell-soldiers, dragon bones, and great spells were in play. And as if that weren't bad enough, the Hero—supposedly aloof from human conflicts—was after Lydia? It was with a heavy heart that I told Walter, "Lydia fought the church on one of our battlefields too. We believe they cast a strategic binding spell."

Walter's expression soured. "The church's roots run deep, then," he spat. "We can safely assume they maneuvered the empire and the league, on top of inciting our rebels."

"We'll have our work cut out for us when the war is over," I said glumly. The major eastern nobles would be punished, as would those

in league with the Church of the Holy Spirit, but our kingdom would be too preoccupied to exert its influence abroad for some time.

Suddenly, a thought struck me. “What happened to the land where Reverie of Restless Revenants was cast? Did the professor purify it?”

“That’s another cause for concern. A strange new faith has sprung up in my duchy and in the empire. You see, Stella and the Hero were the ones who—”

“Pardon my late arrival!”

With that spirited interjection, Duke Leo Lebufera burst into the pavilion. The aristocratic young elf had pale-green hair and wore a uniform in a deeper shade of the same color.

“Don’t apologize,” I said magnanimously.

“This was all rather sudden,” Walter added. “We didn’t think your house would march.”

“Neither did I!” Leo exclaimed, taking a seat. Anyone could see he was eager for battle. “I’ve invited you here to plot the taking of the royal capital.”

“Not so fast,” I said, trying to soothe the elf, who still seemed ready to sound the assault at any moment.

“First, tell us why you joined the war,” Walter pressed.

At that, Leo straightened up in his seat and said, “We marched for one simple reason—the Old Pledge has been invoked.”

Our eyes widened. The Old Pledge was an oath sworn by the ducal houses of Lebufera and Algren following the War of the Dark Lord. It had its roots in the legacy that Shooting Star, the legendary wolf-clan champion famed throughout the continent, had left during the Battle of Blood River. Fulfilling that pledge was the dearest wish of all the western houses.

“I see,” I said, no longer doubtful.

“No wonder your morale is so high,” Walter observed. “Was the wish to retake the eastern capital? What of His Majesty?”

Leo laughed smugly. “As to that—”

Without warning, a sudden gust assailed the pavilion, accompanied by the noise of beating wings. Amid a hectic flurry of activity, a distraught maid entered. Her uniform was disheveled, and she carried a massive scythe on her back. Her pale-scarlet hair danced behind her as she bowed deeply and said, “I beg Your Highnesses’ pardon in consideration of the urgent tidings I bear.”

“Celenissa!” I exclaimed. “What’s happened?”

The new arrival was Celenissa Ceynoth, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number five. Her beautiful face was ghastly pale, but she answered clearly:

“Lady Lydia has set out for the royal capital alone!”

All three of us gave a start. My thoughts froze.

Alone? Did she say "alone"?

My daughter Lydia was strong. At her young age, she had already inherited the nickname "Lady of the Sword." But the rebels had nearly a hundred thousand troops in the royal capital. This went beyond mere recklessness!

"As we speak," Celenissa continued, "Ladies Lynne and Lily are pursuing her on griffins, accompanied by a picked force of maids under the corps's second-in-command! The mistress sends word that she will join in the pursuit as soon as her preparations are complete."

"Lynne and Lisa too?" I groaned.

Walter rose from his seat and announced, "I will return to my camp and speed my vanguard into the city."

"Thank you," I said weakly.

"Don't mention it; this is only a difference of timing. Leo, what of your forces?"

"We'll march at once," Leo declared boldly, clenching his fist. "We've already lost the honor of the first engagement. And I'll share what I know: The Order of Royal Knights is manning the forts along Blood River. His Majesty and Crown Prince John are in the western capital. Princess Cheryl and her guards are in the rear of our army—although I had a hard time convincing Her Royal Highness to stay there. And just recently, I received messengers from the two eastern marquesses."

Did he mean to say that the Lebuferas *weren't* the force that had so masterfully captured the western suburbs? Why had His Majesty remained behind? And what had Marquesses Gardner and Crom had to say? I was on the verge of voicing my questions when the tent flaps were flung open, and a voice boomed:

"The elementals have told me all, youngsters! Once again, I shall be first to the fray!"

Walter and I stared in amazement.

"Why, you're..."

"I see now. The western towns fell to..."

There, grinning intrepidly, stood an elf with beautiful jade-green hair to her shoulders and stunning looks like the goddess. She carried a timeworn spear and wore a green uniform. A strip of black cloth was tied around her right wrist. It was Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, who had held her title two generations before Leo. A living legend, she had once raced across battlefields alongside Shooting Star and even crossed blades with the Dark Lord. Decades must have passed since our last meeting.

"Control yourself, grandmother!" Leo snapped. "Allowing the Shooting Star Brigade to take the lead in every engagement simply

isn't—"

Duchess Leticia shook her head, her eyes flashing danger. "I'll hear no argument—time is of the essence. O Liam!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"What is the greatest number of wings you've heard of appearing on your daughter's back?"

"Pardon?" I stammered, nonplussed by the unexpected question.

"Answer me!" she barked.

"E-Eight, I believe."

"Then her case is serious. I pray we're not too late."

I heard more griffins flapping overhead, followed by shouts of "Caren, that's dangerous! I'll tell Allen on you!" and "Teto, don't breathe a word of it!" Then someone dropped to the ground and poked her head into the pavilion. It was a wolf-clan girl with silver-gray hair, ears, and tail. She wore a Royal Academy uniform, but her hat wasn't school-issue; it was one of the floral berets that demisprites wore to battle. On her shoulder rode a black cat—the professor's familiar, Anko.

Where have I seen this girl before?

"I'm prepared, Duchess Letty," she said. "So are the headmaster, Teto and her classmates, and the Shooting Star Brigade."

"O Caren, what an able girl you are," the former duchess responded. "What say you? Are you *certain* you wouldn't like to wed the best my house can offer when this war has run its course?"

Of course!

Walter must have shared my realization, because he muttered, "Allen's sister" under his breath.

"Chieftains Leyg and Chise made me the same offer," the girl said. "I'll consider it if your best can beat my brother."

"You've a sharp tongue too, girl!" Duchess Leticia roared with laughter. Then she turned to us and said breezily, "Youngsters, I'll await you in the royal capital! And make haste—if the worst befalls, you dukes may be needed in battle. The fall of one with eight wings would endanger the entire kingdom."



"Fresh tidings! Forces loyal to the Ducal House of Howard and its vassals have been spotted on a hill north of the city! As they fly the duke's standard, we believe Walter Howard himself rides with them! By Your Highness's leave, I have the video orb here!"

"Fresh tidings! Forces loyal to the Ducal House of Leinster and its vassals have been spotted on a hill south of the city! They possess a large number of griffins, rendering further aerial reconnaissance difficult. Please view the video orb yourself."

“Fresh tidings! Magical communications have been cut off throughout the city! Hostile forces seem to be responsible! We’ve lost contact with the eastern capital, and communication between units is breaking down!”

“F-Forces loyal to Marquesses Gardner and Crom have occupied the eastern suburbs! Both lords proclaim their intention to ‘smite the rebel threat to the royal capital!’ They’ve cut off our retreat! Lord Greck, g-give us orders!”

Runners streamed into the hall, all bearing unbelievable tidings. Much as I would have liked to deny the reports, the video orbs did show troops flying Howard and Leinster banners, and the paper thrust into my hands bore the seals of Gardner and Crom. This was reality.

While I panicked, my men updated the map of the city with one new marker after another. Foes hemmed us in from the north, east, and south. I shook like a leaf.

What are the empire and the league playing at?! Why did we hear nothing until they were right at our doorstep?! Curse you, Gardner and Crom! All this time, you’ve been weighing us against the other ducal houses!

Despite my jumbled thoughts and ragged breathing, I rose and studied the map, seeking some means to salvage our position. Even after returning the Violet Order to the eastern capital, I still had nearly a hundred thousand troops under my command, while our enemies numbered roughly eighty thousand altogether. We would begin by eliminating the weakest threat—the two marquesses—and securing our retreat. Then—

A messenger burst into the council hall, gasping for breath. His obvious distress drew looks from the nobles who crowded my headquarters.

“Fr-Fresh tidings!” he shouted. “Fresh tidings!”

“Pipe down!” I snapped. “I can hear you. Speak!”

Crises like this are just when keeping a cool head is most vital. I conquered the royal capital. As long as I’m in charge, no situation is too difficult to—

“L-L-Lebufera banners have been spotted on a hill west of the city!”

A hush descended on the hall. Then, chaos.

“Impossible!”

“They left Blood River undefended?!”

“The Lebuferas have troops specialized in taking fortifications.”

“Even barricading ourselves in the palace won’t keep g-giants out for long.”

“Should we fall back to the eastern capital?”

“Then...we couldn’t reach our western forces because...”

“Th-They were wiped out?!”

I banged the table with all my might and bellowed, in a voice I couldn't keep from trembling, “S-Silence! Th-The Lebuferas would never march! It's absurd! It's—”

“A video orb, Your Highness!”

We all stared in rapt astonishment at the orb in the messenger's hand, which did indeed show an army of western minorities. In their van were heavy infantry—giants like hillocks clad in heavy armor and bearing massive weapons and greatshields. They carried ancient standards blazoned with...a shooting star? Next came dwarven sappers, armed with magical artifacts the like of which I'd never seen. These specialists had taken many a stronghold during the War of the Dark Lord. Dragonfolk wyvern riders, famed for their martial prowess, flew overhead. I also spotted a corps of fearsome demisprite sorcerers and numerous formations of elves and humans. And unmistakable atop the hill flew an enormous Lebufera banner.

This time, the hall truly froze.

One of the key assumptions underlying the Great Cause—that the Ducal House of Lebufera would never leave the west—had crumbled. We now found ourselves outnumbered and surrounded on all sides. And the royal capital was hardly a defensible city.

My lieutenant, Raymond, was absent. He had taken that merchant, Ernest, on a mission to negotiate an end to our supply issues with the city's traders. The other earls were gone as well, spread out across the city to fortify their positions. The only people with me were...

It's hopeless. I can't rely on these fools for anything!

“Your Highness,” said one hesitant aristocrat, with a base look in his eyes. I doubted he could even swing a sword. “We're completely surrounded. Surely we stand no chance of—”

“Don't be ridiculous!” I snapped. “We *must* triumph! If we lose this battle, we'll lose everything! Wealth, land, honor, titles—maybe even our lives!”

“B-But then, wh-what do you propose we do?”

“As to that—”

A sudden crash cut my words short. The whole house shook, the lights flickered, and the nobles grew restless.

It's getting closer.

Another messenger ran in. Before he could open his mouth, I demanded, “What was that racket?!”

“R-Run...Run for your lives! We...We can't stop her!”

“What are you babbling about? Reports must be delivered with precision and composure, lest—”

Another crash, as of something being thrown. Screams and shouts

followed. Clearly, something was amiss.

“The enemy is assaulting general headquarters!” cried the messenger, his face bloodless. “Our forces are giving battle, but they won’t hold! Defense seems impossible! E-Evacuate at once!”

Consternation filled the hall. We had established our headquarters in an Algren residence, the most heavily guarded building in the city. Numerous lines of defense barred the way to it, and even a ducal army would have difficulty breaking through the forces that manned them.

“Oh, is that all?” I scoffed. “Doubtless they hope to frighten us with reconnaissance in force. How large is the enemy troop?!”

The messenger mumbled indistinctly.

“I can’t hear you. Speak up!”

“Just one person, Your Highness!”

Silence fell for the umpteenth time that day—then immediately gave way to relieved laughter.

“One person?” I repeated. “Imbecile! What are you losing your head for?! Give them what their rash assault deserves! Or do you mean to tell me that Algren knights are no match for a single—”

Then came the loudest crash of the day, accompanied by a chorus of tearing metal. Ensuing shouts carried a mix of fear and awe. The intruder had penetrated deep into the house. The nobles and guards gripped their sword hilts, while I reached for my halberd, which I’d left propped beside me.

The air shook. A short distance away, fire magic singed my desk. Something was drawing closer. Something dreadful.

Then, without a sound, the heavy hall doors were sliced clean through. A rotund aristocrat beside them squealed and toppled over. *Weak-willed disgrace!*

The doors fell inward, and in stepped...a young woman. Her scarlet hair was cropped short. Her uniform was inky black. She held a sword in each hand, and the wings of flame behind her moved as if with a life of their own. Something was knotted around her wrist—a scrap of dirty scarlet cloth, I thought.

“Who knows where he iiis?” she asked liltingly, sweeping her puzzled gaze over the hall. Her eyes were unfocused.

Is she not in her right mind?

While the nobles recovered and formed up around me, I searched my memory.

“Lydia Leinster?” I said at last. “Don’t tell me you’ve come for my head. They may call you the Lady of the Sword, but you must be mad if you imagine you can manage that!”

My challenge went unanswered. Lydia Leinster slowly turned to look at me, beginning to focus. “Where have you taken him?” she demanded. “Answer quickly.”

“Him”? Who are you talking about?”

“Isn’t that...obvious? I mean my Allen—mine, and mine alone. Where is he being held? You ought to know, Greck Algren.”

Keen-edged daggers erupted from her wings, igniting walls, tables, and chairs in rapid succession.

Wh-What mana!

“Allen?” I repeated, weaving spells and feigning composure, although mentally I was breaking out in a cold sweat. “Oh, the mock beast.” I chuckled. “Come to think of it, people did call him your ‘Brain.’”

“Answer,” Lydia Leinster demanded curtly. Her tone and gaze were uneasy, and her mana wavered.

A communication orb lying on the floor crackled
“...relief...hurry...” Evidently, a relief force was hurrying to my aid.

I racked my brain. If I could stall this addlebrained girl long enough, I stood a chance of capturing her to use as a bargaining chip against the Leinsters. My straits were dire indeed, but I would break free of them!

I took another look at Lydia Leinster, who stood with her swords at the ready. She seemed quite attached to this mock beast of hers.

“It is a fact that we took him prisoner in the eastern capital,” I said with deliberate slowness. “Although I’m told he made quite a nuisance of himself.”

“Th-Then he’s still a—”

“However,” I interrupted her outburst, shooting a meaningful look at the nobles and guards around me. Recalling the fresh news that Raymond had brought me that morning, I continued, “I’m sorry to say that the mock beast is most likely dead by now.”

The color drained from the Lady of the Sword’s face. The light left her eyes, and her wings of flame went with it. A stunned “What?” was all she said.

“What did you expect?” I continued. “Why should we suffer mock beasts and animals to live—especially those that have harmed our forces? Give up, Lydia Leinster. The Brain of the Lady of the Sword is no more.”

The swords slipped from the girl’s hands and stuck point-first in the floor. She crumpled on the spot, staring vacantly into empty space and mumbling brokenly, “It’s not true. It’s not. Allen is gone? Then I...I should...I should at least be at his side when I...”

Perfect!

“Now!” I commanded, thrusting out my halberd. “Apprehend the miscreant!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

The nobles and men-at-arms who had been watching with bated

breath closed in around the Lady of the Sword. With this stroke, we were well on our way to—

Lydia Leinster looked up, and my instinct for self-preservation took over—in spite of myself, I let out a strangled shriek. The others halted, trembling.

Her eyes reflected no light, and they had turned a bloody crimson. Her gaze held unfathomable darkness...and inconceivable hatred. The inhuman girl stood, grasping her swords, the points of which were still embedded in the floor. The tattered cloth on her wrist emitted a faint glow but soon burned off and disintegrated. A mysterious sigil appeared on the back of her right hand as her mana abruptly swelled to new heights.

“F-Fire!” I hastily commanded. “Hold nothing back!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

The frozen soldiers raised their swords, spears, and staves, preparing to unleash all the spells they had been weaving in one great volley. That was when she struck.

All of us in the hall slammed into its walls and floor. I glimpsed a gout of sinister flame—like black blood—blast open the ceiling.

“D-Damn y—” My curses turned to screams as searing pain racked my body.

“Tell me everything you know,” the fiend intoned lifelessly, seizing me by the hair and peering into my eyes. The mark on her right hand had spread as far as her cheek. “Everything. Now.”

I spluttered. I needed to speak, but I was too terrified to get the words out.

“Aim for the one with the burning wings!” bellowed a voice from the doorway. “Fire!”

Dozens of pikes thrust into the room, firing volleys of lightning spears. At the head of the force stood Viscount Zad Belgique!

The Lady of the Sword dropped me and retreated to the windows without a word. Her fiery wings sliced most of the spears out of the air, and where her flames fell to the floor, they writhed like thorny serpents.

While Belgique rushed to my side and helped me up, his troops screamed, their voices quaking.

“Your Highness, evacuate through the basement! We’ll buy you time!”

“Sh-She blocked *all* of those spells?”

“Th-This fire gives me the creeps.”

“I...I can’t measure how much mana she has. It’s off the charts! Sh-She...She can’t be human!”

The thing that had been Lydia Leinster turned to look at us. “He’ll be upset if I follow him,” she said. “I don’t want that. I never, ever

want that. If he hates me...I can't go on living. But...But it doesn't matter anymore. I don't need a world without him in it. I don't care if he gets mad at me; I'll go to where he is. After all, the only place for me in the whole world is by his side. And if you try to stop me from going there..."

To our shock, two more baleful wings blazed forth from the Lady of the Sword's back. She had four now, and they burned dark-crimson. Serpentine briars of flame writhed over the remains of the walls and ceiling. The soldiers' manameters broke down with a series of loud crashes. Their flame-resistant barriers were thinning as well.

The thing masquerading as a girl crossed her swords, then slid them smoothly apart. A blast of wind startled us all as wicked fire enveloped her blades.

Wh-What sheer evil! Sh-She's just...just like a...

The flame-winged devil thrust her swords at us and roared, "I'll slice up and incinerate everything in sight! So get out of my way!"





“Romy, Lily, look there!” I shouted. “I can see fire!”

“Stop taking the lead, Lady Lynne!” Romy snapped over our communication orbs. “Lily!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Lily responded cheerily as she and the other maids urged their griffins forward, overtaking mine.

Thick, dark clouds lowered over the royal capital. The Lebufera army seemed to be jamming magical communications, so our orbs were only effective at close range. I could catch but a few snatches of rebel transmissions. By my dear mother’s order, the rest of our griffin riders had also flown ahead, infiltrating the city’s airspace and raiding rebel positions. As far as I could see, their dominance was unchallenged.

Although only dim lights shone from the battle-scarred royal palace, lamps and sources of mana were still flocking to the Algren residence. From within the burning building, I sensed a raging tempest of mana that beggared belief.

“Dear sister,” I murmured, pressing my right hand to my heart.

Just then, Romy and Lily called a warning.

“Look out around you!”

“Something’s flying this waaay!”

A moment later, dozens of massive objects plummeted out of the dark cloud cover. They rained down on rebel forces, both marching and encamped, and shocked us by bursting into towering infernos. The explosions filled the air with shock waves and clouds of dust. Not a single projectile had landed on civilian structures.

What incredible precision!

“W-Were those boulders?” I murmured, reining in my griffin.

“Are they using chemicals?” Romy wondered at almost the same moment. Lily, meanwhile, exclaimed, “Who’s tossing *mountains*?!”

We had just climbed to a higher altitude and assumed a circular defensive formation when a woman’s voice rang from our communication orbs. “Calling all griffins in flight. I’m guessing you’re Leinsters. This is Chise Glenbysidhe of the demisprites. The dwarves and giants are raring to go, so those attacks will keep coming. We have artillery spotters, but take care you don’t get caught in the blasts. The dragonfolk are about to launch aerial attacks too. That’s all I have to say.”

With that, her message ended, and a second volley of boulders—several hundred this time—pelted down out of the clouds, which they tore asunder as they fell. Again, explosions rocked the cityscape.

A demisprite?! From the west?!

“Lady Lynne, this seems a golden opportunity!” Romy urged.

“Right now, we can breeze on in!” Lily agreed.

I nodded and had just begun to maneuver my griffin when two familiar voices burst from my communicator.

“Lyyynne! Are you there?!”

“Lady Lynne!”

“Tina! Ellie!” I cried, taken aback. My voice shook, and tears blurred my vision.

“Lynne, are you *crying*?” Tina asked, joined by a flustered babble from Ellie.

“I...I’m doing nothing of the kind!” I retorted. “And we have more important things to worry about! Tina, Ellie! My dear sister is in the Algren house, and— Tina? Ellie? Oh, jeez!”

The jamming had resumed, and we had lost contact. I hoped they’d gotten my message, but I couldn’t count on it. Still, with them at my side, even stopping my dear sister was a possibility! And in the meantime, we were coming up on the Algren house and the roiling black smoke that was steadily engulfing it.

Dear sister! Please, please be safe!

We brought our griffins low over the house, bypassing its encircling walls.

Not a foe in sight!

I spotted my chance and leapt down onto the roof, where I swiftly drew my two swords. Romy and Lily followed, the former armed with a long-shafted hammer and the latter bare-handed.

“Provide aerial support,” the second-in-command ordered the other maids. “Until Celenissa arrives...Pia, you take command.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Pia responded. Number nine in the corps, she had soft, close-cropped brown hair and wore a clip in her bangs. “May fortune favor you, Lady Lynne, Lady Lily, ma’am.” Then she led the maids to a higher altitude, taking our griffins with them.

Lily sulked that she was “not a lady” as she drew two greatswords out of thin air. Once I saw she was ready, I dashed off along the roof. She and Romy fell in behind me.

The tempest of mana was growing ever fiercer.

“My dear sister seems to be in the basement,” I said. “We must find a way down.”

“In that case...”

“We’ll make one!”

Romy and Lily shot ahead of me, bringing their hammer and greatswords crashing down. A section of roof burst into a shower of debris, leaving a gaping hole. A dozen or so flabbergasted knights looked up from the hallway below.

They never fail to amaze.

"I'll handle them. Stay out of it," said the maid corps's second-in-command, giving her hammer a twirl.

Lily ignored the order, scarlet hair streaming as she leapt nimbly down with an energetic "Woosh!"

"A...A maid?!"

"I-Intruders!"

"Attack!"

"Sound the ala—"

Lily let out a cheerful whoop and spun in place, twin greatswords in hand. Fiery flowers whirled as she downed all the startled knights in a single strike that cut their swords, spears, and shields to pieces.

"Ta-da! Come on, Lady Lynne! And you too, ma'am! Let's get going!" she called and broke into a run.

"Hey! Not so fast!" I shouted, dropping into the hallway after her. Romy followed suit, muttering that Lily was "in for a scolding on our return."

My dear sister's mana was still getting stronger. I had no time to lose!

We ran and ran through the burning Algren house. Enemy knights and soldiers scattered before us, their disastrously low morale possibly evidence that someone had broken their chain of command. I dashed down a large staircase, searching for my dear sister's mana.

She's...in the basement, below the back of the first floor!

I practically leapt the remaining stairs, landing in the front hall, where—

"Fire!"

A line of knights burst from hiding, spears at the ready, and loosed a volley of lightning blasts. Fire flowers darted ahead of me, deflecting the spells. Lily prepared to charge—then squealed and stopped short when Romy seized her by the scruff of her neck.

"Wait." The second-in-command looked at me and said, "Lady Lynne, please go ahead with Lily. Your humble servant Romy will see to things here."

"Romy..." I faltered, then collected myself and said, "Of course! Thank you."

"Such is a maid's duty. I trust you understand that, Lady Lily?"

"I...I'm a maid! A maid!" Lily fumed, raising her twin greatswords as the senior maid released her. "Romy, you big meanie!"

A startled cry burst from the rebel knights as the supreme spell Firebird assailed them, soaring through nearly a hundred barriers and piercing their hefty shields as well. The fell bird struck the massive front doors head-on, blasting a huge hole in them and leaving the

entire hall blazing in its wake! While the remains of the doors ignited, Lily thrust her blades in the ground. Then, folding her arms—in a way that I couldn't help noticing emphasized her bosom—she said, "Whew! Way to go, me."

I glared reproachfully at my cousin, reflecting that I couldn't hope to equal her in combat.

Rebel troops streamed in through the front entrance.

"Lady Lynne! Lily!" Romy cried sharply.

"Right!" we responded and sped off down a hallway. From behind us, I could hear the crash of battle. Soon, we would reach the basement stairs. And then—

"Lynne, stop!" Lily shouted anxiously.

I froze just as a gout of dusky crimson flame burst from the ground ahead of us. To our astonishment, it blasted through the first floor, then the second, third, fourth...all the way to the roof and beyond. The sinister fire seemed almost alive—like snakes clad in thorns—as it crept over walls and floors, expanding its dominion.

"I...I've seen this before," I murmured, trembling. "At Avasiiek."

"Come on, Lady Lynne!" Lily urged.

Below us was my dear sister, Lydia Leinster. I steeled myself, deployed the most powerful fire-resistant barriers I could manage, and sprang into the gaping hole before me. At once, my view expanded to reveal a magnificent church.

What is something like this doing beneath an Algren residence?

An inferno pricked my skin, and the stench of burning flesh stung my nose. Swords and spears were driven into the walls, floor, and ceiling. The remains of helms and armor lay alongside dozens of motionless knights—unconscious, I believed. The Church of the Holy Spirit's emblem hung in the center of the room, but it had been sliced clean in two, as had the altar and pillars. Beneath the torn banner, a young woman in a tattered jet-black uniform gripped a man in Algren colors by the throat. Her wings of dark-crimson fire fluttered, and her two swords were stuck point-first in the floor.

The man—Greck Algren—groaned, "H-Help...Help me."

"Dear sister!" I shrieked. "Please stop this!"

She carelessly hurled Greck against a wall. He let out one last groan, then fell silent, evidently unconscious. Had my dear sister demolished the rebel high command alone?!

While I reeled, Lily called, "Lydia!"

"He said Allen is dead," my dear sister mumbled. "And that Grant knows where. So I'll burn everything to ashes and go to the eastern capital."

"M-My dear brother is—"

"He's lying!" Lily interrupted me. "Snap out of it, Lydia!"

My dear sister drew her swords from the ground and said, “Will you get in my way?” She listlessly raised the blades, and we gave a start as her mana suddenly ballooned. Flames spilled from her baleful wings, spawning countless spiny serpents of fire. “If you do...”

“What?” I murmured, stunned.

“Lynne!” Lily cried.

I sensed a disturbance in my dear sister’s mana. The next thing I knew, she had vanished and reappeared beside me.

That teleportation spell my dear brother was working on!

I reacted without thinking and blocked with my trusty sword—a feat I could never have managed if not for my daily training. Even so, I screamed and Lily grunted as we went flying into a wall. With a metallic clink, my sword blade fell point-first to the floor, severed halfway along its length. I struggled upright, using my dear sister’s spare sword as a prop. Then a little shriek escaped me.

The Lady of the Sword, Lydia Leinster’s eyes had turned crimson, and eight dark, fiery wings of the same hue spread out behind her. The mark of Blazing Qilin covered her right arm, extending all the way to her cheek.

Sh-She’s just...just like a...

“D-Devil,” I murmured, dazed.

“Lydia!” Lily called again weakly, staggering to her feet.

My dear sister ignored us and looked up at the sky. I knew what would happen if I let her go to the eastern capital now, yet my trembling limbs refused to act.

Someone! Anyone! Please, stop my dear sister!

Then, just as she spread her eight wings to take flight, countless black threads bore down on her, binding her and her plumage fast. The strands snapped one after another, but fresh spells continually replaced them.

Dark magic?!

Two women dropped from the upper floors, landing without making a sound and murmuring my dear sister’s name.

“Dear mother! Maya!” I cried.

“And that’s not all!” declared a voice I’d longed to hear, followed by another shouting, “Lady Lynne!” and a terse “Mm-hmm.” With the aid of a levitation spell, three girls landed protectively in front of me.

“Tina, Ellie,” I gasped, my voice choked with emotion.

A rod-wielding girl with blue-tinged platinum hair, a white-and-azure military uniform, and an azure ribbon on her right wrist—Tina Howard—looked at me and gave a smug little laugh. “Were you really that lonely, Lynne?” she asked brightly. “I suppose little Miss Second Place can’t get by without us.”

“I...”

I hung my head, unable to finish my retort, when the warm, gentle light of healing magic showered Lily and me. A girl with blonde pigtails and a maid's uniform—Ellie Walker—gently took my hand and helped me to my feet.

"Ellie," I said slowly.

"It will be all right, Lady Lynne. After all..."

A beautiful young woman with hair nearly the same shade as Tina's and an unmistakable air of refinement alighted before us. She held a wand and rapier, and the uniform she wore was white.

"Tina, Ellie, your reunion can wait," she said. "Mina, the maids, and other houses' troops are hard at work securing our perimeter, but this is still enemy headquarters. Lynne, are you hurt?"

"Lady Stella," I murmured. This was Tina's elder sister, Stella Howard, although I couldn't imagine what had happened to give her such a confident bearing. "I'm fine. But...But my dear sister!"

"Alice."

"Hmm. She hasn't fallen yet," said the girl whom Lady Stella had addressed. A timeworn sword hung at her waist, and her long, gleaming, platinum-blond hair trailed behind her as, with a little "Hup," she leapt high into the air. My dear sister's squirming wings launched daggers of fire, but the girl smashed them listlessly with her bare hands and landed behind her.

Unable to believe my eyes, I turned to Tina and Ellie.

"That's Alice Alvern, the Hero—and also my comrade!" Tina declared.

"Sh-She calls me her 'enemy,'" Ellie added, groaning.

The honest-to-goodness Hero?! The slayer of dragons and devils?! What is someone like her doing— Unless she's here to hunt...a devil?

Slowly, my dear mother unsheathed her sword. Her hand trembled faintly as she said, "Stop this, Lydia. If you won't stop...I'll have no choice but to use force."

I felt a tightness in my chest. If only Lily and I had been more dependable!

Alice narrowed her eyes and coldly pronounced, "Right now, you're just a crybaby—no match for me. Stop." After a slight pause, she added, "You'll make Allen cry."

At those words, my dear sister stopped straining against her bonds.

I swallowed. Before her stood the Bloodstained Lady, Lisa Leinster. Behind her, the Hero, Alice Alvern. With them was Maya Mato, the "Shadowguard," once hailed as the greatest master of dark magic in the south. Even Lily and I were fully healed and back in the fight. My dear sister ought to be helpless against these odds. It stood to reason.

My dear mother and Alice called to her again.

“Lydia.”

“Crybaby.”

The instant the words left their mouths, it happened! The whole area writhed as thousands of fiery serpents surged toward us. A flash of searing light knocked me back. I hastily raised my magical defenses and shielded my eyes with my hands.

“Dear sister!” I shouted amid the wild, fiery gusts. But when the flash and shock waves subsided and I opened my eyes, she was gone. Through a fresh hole in the ceiling, I could see flickering flames and the dark clouds that hid the sky.

No. It couldn't be. Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, fled without a fight?!

My dear mother bit her lip and let her sword hang limply at her side. Maya seemed on the verge of tears.

My...My dear sister has left us. She's gone to the eastern capital to attack Grant Algren, who might know where to find my dear brother.

My broken sword and my dear sister's spare slipped from my grasp and fell with a clatter. All the strength went out of me, and I sank to the floor, cold tears running down my cheeks. Tina and Ellie raced up to me, calling my name, but I couldn't stand.

My platinum-haired peer put her hands on my shoulders and shook me, shouting, “Lynne! This is no time for weeping! We need to chase Lydia *now*!”

I couldn't respond at first. But at last, I said brokenly, “It's no use.”

“Lynne?”

Tears blurred my vision.

How could my dear sister...strike at me in earnest?

“What are you talking about?!” Tina demanded, shaking me some more. “Mr. Allen isn't here, remember?! So, who will save Lydia if we don't?!”

I dried my eyes and brushed my carefree peer's hands aside. “We can't!” I snapped at her. “It's simply not possible! I can't fill my dear brother's shoes, and I never could!”

“Lynne!”

I winced in sudden pain just as Ellie gasped, “Lady Tina!”

Tina had slapped me.

She stood up, glaring down on me, while the mark of Frigid Crane on the back of her right hand shone with a cold, clear light that gleamed off the ribbon about her wrist. “Fine,” she said. “If that's what you think, Lynne, go ahead and cry. Ellie, Stella, and I will stop Lydia ourselves!”



My rage erupted. “You can only say that because you haven’t fought her!” I yelled, standing up and grabbing Tina. “We can’t possibly stop my dear sister—stop the Lady of the Sword—in the state she’s in!”

“What will you do, then?” she retorted. “Wait here, twiddling your thumbs and bawling, like I used to back when I couldn’t use magic? Mr. Allen would never even consider that, and you know it!”

“Tina...”

My best friend squeezed my hands, cracked a smile, and said, “Lynne, do you remember what he told us in the carriage on the day of the Royal Academy entrance ceremony? ‘Use your power when you protect yourselves, those you care about, and your beliefs.’”

I haven’t forgotten. I remember every single word out of my dear brother’s mouth.

“Before I met him, I couldn’t cast a single spell,” Tina continued, with a mature smile. “I got my power from him. So...So...”

She said no more, but I understood. My dear brother and sister were precious to me as well, and I would do absolutely everything in my power to save them. And I owed that revelation to...

“Lynne?” Tina asked.

To this girl in front of me. Not that I would ever say so—I couldn’t bear to admit it!

I picked up my broken sword and my dear sister’s spare, sheathed them, and folded my arms. “Oh, all right,” I said, speaking fast. “I’ll accompany you, since you’re clearly beside yourself with worry about going alone. Feel free to thank me.”

“What?!” Tina spluttered. “I seem to recall a certain Miss Second Place sobbing that she wasn’t up to the task!”

“Who could that be? I’ve certainly not met her.”

Tina growled.

Then we both let out startled cries as Ellie swept us up in a hug, crying, “L-Lady Tina, L-Lady Lynne!” My other best friend was all smiles and delighted giggling.

Tina and I shared a chuckle in the maid’s embrace.

We will save my dear brother and sister! I know we can do it!

“Oh, how lovely!” Lily remarked, pressing her hands together and giving a prim little laugh. It was hard to believe she had just been on the warpath.

Lady Stella, who had been watching us affectionately, made the most elegant bow to my dear mother and said, “Duchess Lisa, it seems so long ago that we last met.”

“I hardly recognized you, Stella,” my dear mother responded.

“And you, Lady Hero.”

“Mmm,” Alice mused, looking up at the holes in the ceiling. “She isn’t that strong, but she knows Allen’s spells, which makes her a handful. And she hosts Blazing Qilin. A cursed child with witch blood and a great elemental. If we leave her alone, she could end up the first ever sixteen-winged fallen. But we still have time. Don’t we, Lady of Wind?”

“Verily!” a ringing voice answered, and a perception-blocking spell lifted to reveal...

“A sea-green griffin?!” Tina and Ellie exclaimed as the creature made a leisurely landing. A lovely elven woman with jade-green hair and an old spear in her hand dismounted, followed by a wolf-clan girl wearing a cloak over a Royal Academy uniform—although her floral beret wasn’t school-issue.

“Caren!” Lady Stella cried joyfully, racing up to her.

“Stella!” Caren called back, and the pair embraced. She was the vice president of the Royal Academy student council and my dear brother’s younger sister.

But who was the “Lady of Wind”?

“Is *she* the Emerald Gale from my mother’s stories?” Tina murmured.

Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera watched Lady Stella and Caren’s reunion with affection, then turned to Alice and muttered, “The current Hero. A century has passed since last I saw one.” After that, she moved to the side of my dear mother, who received her with a dejected murmur.

“Letty, I—”

“Be not ashamed. No mother finds it easy to level a sword at her own daughter. That girl’s feelings for Caren’s brother are strong. And if she had fully fallen and become a devil, she would not have fled. Even the Hero will stay her hand for a time.”

“It depends,” said Alice. “Lady of Wind, you were a cursed child. Tell me, can an eight-winged one recover?”

A shock ran through the group. The Emerald Gale had once been a cursed child?

“They can. If you seek proof, it stands before you!” Duchess Leticia grinned and pointed at herself.

“Okay, then. I’ll wait, since I owe him.” The Hero nodded, then walked over and threw her arms around Lady Stella. “Saint Wolf, I’m sleepy. Comrade, maybe-comrade, wake me in the morning. Enemies number one and two, stay and mind the royal capital! I find you most deplorable. Violet Growly, good work. Your dagger’s been good too.”

“Alice?” Stella asked hesitantly.

“Yes, comrade!” Tina saluted.

Ellie hung her head and groaned, while Lily, looking equally

dejected, wailed, “I...I’m an enemy tooooo?!”

Why does she treat us so differently? I glanced down at my chest. *I...I’m still growing!*

“Growly?” Caren murmured, looking baffled.

I heard a change in the Hero’s breathing. Evidently, she had fallen asleep.

“The girl has a will of iron!” Duchess Letty exclaimed, roaring with laughter. “Since our paths cross here, I may as well tell you what it truly means to be a ‘cursed child.’ We needn’t fear interruption—the Shooting Star Brigade, Rodde, the night cat, and the wicked professor’s pupils have joined the Leinster and Howard maids in subduing this area.”

The Shooting Star Brigade?! The one from the old stories? And the headmaster and...

We turned to Caren, who said, “She means Anko and Allen’s former underclassmen from the university. They kept me safe on the way here.”

“Maya, restrain all the enemy soldiers and erect barriers,” my dear mother ordered the maid corps’s former number three, who was standing by.

“Yes, mistress.” Maya waved her left hand, and dark strands bound our numerous fallen foes, while an umbral wall rose around our group.

Duchess Leticia waited until the barrier was complete, then began, “Time is short. As far as the public is concerned, a cursed child is one born without any aptitude for magic. In truth, however, the term denotes those born branded with a genuine curse—the potential to become devils. This secret is known only to the king, the Four Great Dukes, and a select few of the lesser nobility.”

We were speechless. I could tell that Tina was clenching her hands tight.

“Needless to say, not all meet that fate,” the former duchess continued. “Most remain as they are, though at a cost—those unable to wield magic by the age of twenty perish. Those who master it face no immediate danger.”

“Then...Then you expect me to believe that my dear sister will become a devil?!” I interjected in spite of myself. Lily looked pained as well.

“If nothing is done. Yet I believe we can pull her back from the brink—so long as we can overtake her. Rail traffic to the eastern capital is cut off, and neither griffin nor wyvern can outstrip an eight-winged one.”

“N-No,” Tina gasped, while Ellie groaned.

“What good are we if we can’t reach her?” I muttered, biting my

lip and dropping my gaze.

Dear sister...

“Yet the feat is hardly beyond *your* ability,” Duchess Leticia said smugly. “Is it, O Flower Sage, Chise Glenbysidhe?”

Space folded without warning.

Teleportation through Maya’s barrier?! And I remember that name from the warning transmission!

There appeared a demisprite sorceress with pale-orange hair and translucent wings on her back. She wore a floral cap and carried a staff longer than she was tall.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Chieftain Chise said, floating in midair and glaring at Duchess Leticia. “Bloodstained Lady, my heart goes out to you, but an eight-winged fallen is no laughing matter. And with the Hero involved, I recommend you prepare for the worst.”

“Oh? Well then” was Duchess Leticia’s response.

“Chieftain Chise,” murmured my dear mother.

“Can’t you do it?” Tina demanded, suddenly forcing her way into the conversation.

Chieftain Chise squinted and muttered, “A cursed child with a great elemental?” as she slowly alighted before us. She was roughly our height, and her eyes widened as she inspected first Tina, then Ellie and Lady Stella. “I don’t believe it. This...This simply isn’t— What is the world coming to?”

Then, in a kind voice, she called, “Caren, dear.”

“Yes?” Caren responded.

“Were there a Tijerina and a Glenbysidhe among your bodyguards?”

“You mean Teto and Suse?”

“Oh, good. They *are* here. That simplifies things. Ma’am, Lisa Leinster.”

“You called?” said the former duchess, while my dear mother answered with a more reserved “How may I help you?”

“Gather everyone together. I’m going to cast a strategic spell.”

A strategic spell?! That whole class of magic is forbidden except in times of national emergency!

Duchess Leticia and my dear mother fell silent and stood up straighter.

“Understood. I shall send you Rodde, the night cat, the professor’s students, and several Lebufera sorcerers.”

“You have my gratitude. The Leinsters will send you aid as well. Maya.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Caren interjected, “Chieftain Chise...”

“Will you help us?” Lady Stella asked, finishing her thought.

“Of course I will!” the legendary sorceress replied, with a wonderfully tender smile. “I traveled all the way out here to keep my promise to that big softie—our one and only commander. I’ll hurry on to the eastern capital, and then from there to wherever Caren’s brother is held prisoner! Oh, and this is a personal matter”—she lowered her hat brim—“but I hear you girls’ tutor lent a hand to a descendant of my lifelong friend Tijerina as well as my own disinherited great-granddaughter. So, leave everything to me, Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage! I swear I’ll get you to the eastern capital ahead of the Lady of the Sword!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the five of us responded in unison. My dear mother and Duchess Leticia watched us affectionately, while Lily looked on enviously, grumbling that she wished she could join in.

Tina held her rod high and declared, “We’ll bring Lydia to her senses in the eastern capital! And then it will be *our* turn to save Mr. Allen!”

Chapter 2

“I think I’ll start with a little test,” said the young sorceress before me. Linaria Etherheart had long crimson hair and wore a pair of small spectacles. And although she held an enchanted sword in her right hand, it was her left that she listlessly raised and then swung swiftly down.

The vicious creature she had conjured—the supreme spell Firebird—launched toward me.

I tried to meddle with the spell but, to my dismay, labyrinthine encryption locked me out. It reminded me of a conversation I had once had with Lydia’s grandmother, Scarlet Heaven Lindsey Leinster. “Allen, dear,” she had chirped, “there’s more to magic than you know.”

Changing tack, I cast fire-resistant barriers, applied wind magic to my feet, and retreated for all I was worth. To keep Linaria occupied, I silently cast the elementary spell Divine Light Shot, targeting her from all sides. Or at least, that was the plan.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I groaned, tumbling on the floor after evading the Firebird’s assault.

“My little brother and sister used to play like this all the time when they were children,” the sorceress said contemptuously. “Of course, they had you beat in both speed and precision.”

As hard as it was to believe, she hadn’t resorted to her magical defenses, let alone her sword—she had canceled out all my shots with an equal number of identical power. Silent and delayed activation had done nothing to trip her up. Her skill was superhuman!

I sprang to my feet and started sprinting as the Firebird swooped down at me. I was off-balance—unless I came up with something, I wouldn’t be able to dodge!

I cast the elementary spell Divine Earth Wall under my feet, kicking off it to launch myself upward. Once airborne, I steered myself using wind magic, retreating atop one of the room’s many bookcases.

The Firebird didn’t pursue. It gracefully circled the room, scattering flaming plumes that spawned thorny fire serpents where they touched the floor. The creatures were imbued with staggering mana—easily potent enough to light the whole room ablaze. Yet nothing burned. The table, chairs, and numerous shelves of antique tomes were all unscathed, leaving my own singed skin the only

casualty.

I looked at Linaria. She hadn't moved a step, still held her sword in her right hand, and possessed that faint, transparent quality of one not among the living. This great sorceress had perished five hundred years ago, when the continent was in an age of strife. She called herself Twin Heavens because she alone in the annals of history had been named both Heaven's Knight and Heaven's Mage—titles denoting supremacy in close- and long-range combat, respectively. In that sense, she was the zenith of human achievement. The present age knew her as the Fire Fiend, and to the best of my knowledge, no document preserved her name.

Her exploits in battle were, in a word, magnificent. Even according to the mere handful of surviving legends, she had wielded the great spell Blazing Qilin to level half of what was now our eastern capital; invented seven types of tactical taboo before her afternoon tea got cold; single-handedly slain three of the four monstrous Stinging Seas which had then plagued the continent; annihilated a lord of vampires, who boasted of immortality, through seven days and seven nights of ceaseless destruction; and interred and sealed the bones of a dead water dragon beneath the great assembly hall in the city of water. This litany of astonishing feats had taken on the form of a heroic saga, doubtless embellished over the intervening centuries. To be frank, I had doubted their veracity. But seeing her intercept my spells had shaken my skepticism.

Divine Light Shot was among the fastest spells now known, yet she had countered mine by mirroring it perfectly. I had practiced magical control every single day since I'd first resolved to become a sorcerer, and that experience only gave me a greater appreciation for how hopelessly outclassed I was. "Genius" was too tame a word for the young woman before me. She defied all reason. Her Firebird clinched it, I thought, looking at the gracefully soaring creature. Linaria was rapidly fading, far from the height of her powers, yet it was the finest spell I'd ever seen.

I gave a hollow laugh—the only response I could manage. Since meeting Lydia during the Royal Academy entrance exam, I had fought many foes beyond my ability:

The dreadful black dragon, practically a living calamity in its rage.

A four-winged devil, an archenemy of the human race capable of defying a whole nation alone.

A pure-blooded vampire, whose kind lurked in the shadows and only rarely set foot openly on the stage of history.

The Stinging Sea, a millennium-old monster which had reduced several small countries to ruin.

If not for the Hero, Alice Alvern, I would have died fighting the black dragon. Against the devil and the vampire, I'd had the aid of my dear, departed friend, Zelbert Régnier. I had managed to slay the Stinging Sea because the monster had lost much of its strength to old age, and also because the Ducal House of Leinster's head maid, Anna, had joined the fight. And above all, I thought, clenching my fists, I had faced every crisis with Lydia Leinster at my side. I firmly believed that, together, we were unbeatable.

But Lydia wasn't with me now. I would have to earn Twin Heavens' trust alone—which meant proving myself competent to escort Atra, also known as the great elemental Thunder Fox, into the outside world.

Quite a tall order. If only I at least had a proper weapon to—

Linaria vanished. I sensed a slight disturbance in her mana, although even that would have eluded me if not for my diligent training. A chill from above and behind me accompanied her dispassionate remark:

“If you only focus on the bird, you'll be dead before you know it.”

I hastily ducked under a horizontal sweep of her enchanted sword.

Short-range tactical teleportation magic!

I conjured a dozen or so ice mirrors in midair and leapt, using them as footholds to gain distance. But the Firebird struck again, and I lost one mirror after another as I scrambled to evade it.

“What crude ice,” Linaria remarked. “My little sister used to mask her position by teleporting from mirror to mirror.”

She followed this scathing critique with a haphazard swing of her sword. Every mirror in the path of the enchanted blade split in two, then the rest shattered from the shock wave of her strike.

“Y-You must be joking!” I cried, narrowly evading the slash. It knocked me into empty air, but I steadied myself with a momentary levitation spell and made good my escape to a farther bookcase. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small shelf. Several pictures stood on it, and a dagger adorned the wall above them.

I couldn't weather Linaria's assault bare-handed. I needed that dagger. Yet I would also need to get past her without it, since the bookcase she stood on lay between me and the weapon.

“Apart from my little brother, you're the first person I've seen use childish tricks like that in combat,” the sorceress said, resting her blade on her shoulder. “But if you insist on trying...”

“What now?” I groaned. Every fiber of my being was on high alert as I continued weaving spells and racking my brain for an optimal solution. I couldn't afford even a single misstep.

A beautiful jade-green breeze began to whirl around Linaria's feet. She slowly leveled her enchanted sword at me, leaning slightly

forward as she shifted to a thrusting stance. Her Firebird suddenly gained speed and resumed barreling toward me, while a succession of thorny, serpentine flames lunged up from the floor.

A three-pronged assault!

I conjured fresh mirrors, fully conscious that I was playing right into her hands.

A grunt of pain escaped me as I dodged the avian menace by a hair's breadth, using water spells to cool my burning skin. I briefly perched on a mirror near the skylight and then—

“You ought to use *this*!” Linaria snapped, kicking off her bookcase to run me through in midair. I had a perfect view of her jade-green whirlwind and the vivid trail of light it left behind her.

“Flight magic?!” I cried. I’d known it existed, and I’d been experimenting with formulae for my student Ellie, but I had never seen it used before.

Frantically, I considered my options. Should I intercept her with offensive spells? No. Even if I managed to take her by complete surprise, nothing in my arsenal could so much as scratch her. I ought to avoid trading blows at all costs.

Should I retreat, then? Also no. I was at an overwhelming disadvantage in terms of aerial mobility. Evasion would be suicide. Even if I survived her first strike, I couldn’t dodge her second.

Conclusion?

I exhaled. “It looks like *this* is my only option!”

Weaving several spells at once, I cobbled together an imitation of my sister Caren’s signature move, using lightning magic to enhance my senses. Then I gave the mirror a firm kick and charged straight at Linaria!

For the first time, hesitation flashed across her face. Then she revealed her pointed canines in a grin worthy of a hungry wolf. “Well now,” she said. “If that’s how you want it, I’m happy to oblige!”

Her deadly, whirlwind-guided lunge filled me with terror. If I took a hit like that...

The voice of my martial arts teacher came back to me: “Listen, Allen. Keep your eyes wide open and watch your opponent’s strike until the very last moment with a big grin on your face. Don’t let fear beat you! I believe you can do it. After all, you’re my star pupil.”

My teacher had always been ready with a hearty laugh and a word of encouragement—even in the wake of the New Town tragedy that had claimed Atra of the fox clan’s life, when most beastfolk had given me the cold shoulder.

Forcing my grimace into the semblance of a smile, I used my own wind magic to counteract Linaria’s gusts, weakening them to a force I could bear. Then I drew as close as I possibly could and—

“Well now,” Linaria murmured again as I gritted my teeth and twisted myself clear of her blade a fraction of a second before it impaled me!

For a moment, the buffeting gale flipped me upside down. Linaria maintained perfect posture despite her missed thrust, trading places with me without so much as rattling the skylight. The word “unbelievable” flashed through my mind.

I activated the elementary spells Divine Darkness Threads and Divine Water Chains, temporarily restraining the fiery serpents. In a desperate scramble, I landed on the patch of floor I’d just cleared, then leapt again with all my might, aiming for the dagger on the wall. In the process, I caught a brief glimpse of one of the paintings. It showed a smiling Linaria in a Royal Academy uniform, different from the current iteration but still recognizable. With her were a young boy and girl—her siblings, perhaps, although neither their hair nor their faces looked alike.

“Who said you could touch that dagger?” Linaria demanded, teleporting in front of me.

I blocked her thrust with the sheathed dagger, although it sent me flying anyway. I flipped over once in midair and cast a levitation spell to break my fall.

Having broken free of their bonds, the fiery serpents circled around me, cutting off my escape. Linaria’s Firebird swooped down, and her sword sucked it in. I tightened my grip on the dagger.

“Don’t bother,” she said, giving me an icy glare. “You can’t draw it. Not even I could do that—only my brother and sister could.”

Her sword thrust had left no mark on the strangely patterned sheath. This dagger, it seemed, bore some enchantment of its own.

Linaria thrust her blade into the floor. A vast—all *too* vast—surge of mana began to converge on her.

I...I know this feeling. D-Don’t tell me...

“I’m done testing you,” Linaria declared, looking straight at me. “I based this taboo spell, Hermitage of Verdant Billows, on secret magics crafted by the very first Etherheart. I’ll give you a special demonstration, so try to survive!”

A complex magic circle was spreading out from her to cover the entire room.

Th-This doesn’t bode well!

A moment later, a myriad of roots and branches burst up through the floor.

I knew it! Botanical magic!

“I’ve never met another human who could cast it!” I said, swiftly casting Divine Fire Wave to burn away the foliage and Divine Ice Wave to hold the serpents at bay. Meanwhile, I leapt onto the tallest

bookcase. From there, I conjured another mirror near the skylight and hopped onto it.

The room, which was larger than most training grounds, was fast becoming a jungle. Even the flame serpents were getting swallowed up.

“I’ve never even imagined botanical magic on this scale,” I murmured.

Not all taboo spells used during the age of strife had been passed down to the present day. To my knowledge, Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend was the only surviving formula that would activate reliably. Throughout the continent, masters of such spells were now thought to be a dying breed, yet Linaria had cast one with ease.

Even as I marveled, branches continued to curl around bookcases and other furniture, pulling them under. Only the area around Linaria and her little shelf of mementos remained untouched.

The formidable sorceress drew her sword from the floor, and her spell was complete. In mere moments, she had entirely transformed the ground we fought on. “You shouldn’t let a little thing like this startle you,” she said. “And anyway, I already told you that botanical magic is an invention of the first Etherheart—one of the last witches. It only spread among the beastfolk because they enjoyed the favor of the World Tree, and because the first happened to adopt one of them.”

“World Tree? The first Etherheart?” I echoed, baffled by these unknown terms. Still, those questions could wait.

Again, I tightened my grip on the dagger.

“You can’t draw it,” Linaria repeated. “It’s impossible.”

Is it my imagination, or is there a wish buried in her words? Well, either way...

“I won’t know unless I try!” I shouted, encouraging myself as I pulled on the hilt. And then...

The blade slid free!

It had a single edge and the most beautiful temper patterns I had ever seen—waves of white, blue, green, and black. The instant after I drew it, a fierce, snowy gust sprang up, freezing the branches which by now reached nearly to the skylight. No longer able to support their own weight, the foliage broke, fell, and shattered. And the bitter frost was spreading to the tree trunks as well.

“What on earth...?”

I could only gape at the magnitude of mana on display. This freezing dagger rivaled—or maybe even surpassed—the Leinsters’ ancestral sword True Scarlet! And the ice it conjured was a compound of four elements—water, wind, light, and darkness. I recognized none of the formulae involved.

“Oh, I see now,” Linaria murmured, as stunned as I was. “So that’s

it. You're her..." A single tear rolled down her cheek. Then she turned to me, smiling beautifully, and said, "Allen of the wolf clan, is it? 'Twin Heavens' Linaria Etherheart recognizes your valor. My beloved brother and sister imbued that dagger with their mana and gave it to me as a charm. No coward could ever—*ever*—draw it! So..."

The great sorceress raised her left hand high above her head. The trees groaned, and my eyes widened as I raised my own left hand to shield myself.

Space itself bent as a rod materialized, clad in an aura of divinity. It was made of wood, judging by the color of the material, and the beautiful orbs set into its tip reminded me of a flower. This was no ordinary implement—of that, I was certain.

"It would be rude to hold back," Linaria finished, with a daredevil grin. She gripped her enchanted sword in her right hand and the rod in her left, ready for battle. "You should feel proud—forcing me to use both hands is quite an achievement."

I could only force a grin and say, "Words fail me" as I calmly adjusted my grip on the dagger. With the mana it contained, I would be able to activate supreme spells and anything else I cared to try. But would they work against the world's greatest sorceress and swordswoman?

Linaria made a wide sweep with her rod. Eight magic circles appeared in the air, from which eight Firebirds emerged. And that wasn't all—eight wings of crimson flame unfurled from her back, and the tips of her sword and rod turned a vivid shade of the same color. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they were crimson too. Her mana skyrocketed.

"This is the best I can do now," she said. "What a shame I can't show you witches' arcana, omni-elemental supreme magic, or sixteen wings. And since I'm so nice, I'll remind you one last time: fight like your life depends on it. Atra's mana—"

"Is off-limits," I interrupted.

Linaria arched her brows.

With a shrug, I added, "Have you forgotten? She's sound asleep right now. Wouldn't it be a shame to wake her? Besides, being a man, I'd like to go it alone if I can. Although, since I'm fighting a woman, I suppose that argument doesn't carry much weight."

"My little brother once said the same thing," Linaria responded. "Well then..." The mood changed. Her long hair rose on currents of mana. "Show me everything you've got!"

"Gladly!" I cried, drawing all the mana that I could control from the dagger and double-casting the supreme spell Frost-Gleam Hawks!

White and azure lights danced through the air as, with a wild, snowy gust, *three* hawks of ice launched themselves into Linaria's

eight birds of ill omen. As they took flight, I performed a pseudo-Lightning Apotheosis, hurling the dagger and transforming it into the head of an electric spear with which I charged Linaria.

“Well now. You’ve come close to reinventing silver-snow,” the descendant of witches remarked, breaking into a delighted grin. “Not bad. But...”

My three Frost-Gleam Hawks canceled out one of her Firebirds before evaporating. I brought my spear down and—

“You won’t reach me,” she concluded as my lightning burst against her superhuman barrier, never striking its target. The sorceress sighed. “No creativity. Maybe it’s a manly pride thing, but what a disappointment!”

I grunted as her wings suddenly flared with power, knocking me back.

Linaria rose off the floor and crossed her sword and rod. While she absorbed her remaining Firebirds one after another, a supremely intricate magic circle appeared in the air. Within it moved a colossal snake of fire, covered in thorns and boasting sword-blade wings!

“This is the most powerful spell I can cast at the moment,” she haughtily declared. “The first Etherheart was a companion to Stone Serpent and derived this magic from it. Only one person has ever managed to really block it—my sister when she was with Frigid Crane. Become the second, if you can!”

“I couldn’t possibly take it head-on,” I said candidly. “So...”

“Wait!” Linaria exclaimed in surprise. “You mimicked my mana?!”

“I’ll resort to a few modest tricks!”

The fourth Frost-Gleam Hawk, which I’d activated silently and kept camouflaged above us, swooped down on Linaria! The astonished sorceress immediately interrupted her spell and bisected the bird with a flash of her sword—only for it to transform into countless vines of ice and light.

“And that’s not all!” I shouted as a startled cry escaped Linaria.

I cast another Frost-Gleam Hawk and concentrated both birds into the dagger, activating the Azure Spear. Then I hurled it at Linaria with all my might!

“It’ll take more than that!” the sorceress snapped, her blazing wings shredding my icy creepers and restoring her liberty.

She intercepted my Azure Spear with her rod—a clash of raging blizzard and hellfire. For a moment, the dagger’s vast stores of mana put up a furious resistance. Then a pale cloud formed, and the broken blade fell to the floor.

Linaria dispelled the fog with a wave of her sword. “Now it’s—”

“Over!” I shouted, using Black Cat Promenade—the experimental short-range tactical teleportation spell I’d shared with Lydia—to

appear directly above my opponent. Then I unleashed the final two spells I'd kept in reserve: the supreme spells Firebird and Blizzard Wolf!

I was just about to strike Linaria with them at point-blank range when I realized that the little shelf and its paintings were in my line of fire. Her eyes wavered slightly, even as she prepared a teleportation spell of her own at superhuman speed.

How precious those pictures must be to her, I thought. And if I strike, they might be caught in the blast.

For a fraction of a second, I hesitated.

"You're wide open!" Linaria shouted. She had teleported even higher up and brought her rod crashing down.

"Oh, dra—"

My exclamation ended in a grunt of pain. Unable to defend myself, I took the full force of the blow, and my spells disintegrated as I plummeted to the floor. I managed to avoid a painful collision by cushioning myself with a left-handed levitation spell, but my mind was fading. And just like that, I blacked out.

Someone was singing merrily. I knew the tune—it was the same one that Atra had sung.

The back of my head was warm. With blood, perhaps? But I wasn't in pain. Tentatively, I opened my eyes.

A curtain of silky crimson hair fell around me as its owner peered down. She wore a look of heartfelt relief as she said, "I see you're conscious."

"Pardon?" I replied blankly, stunned by my situation as I now perceived it. Linaria was sitting on the floor, resting my head on her lap. Her eye color had returned to normal, and her flaming wings had vanished. I scrambled to rise. "I...I'm so sorry! I'll move right a—"

Linaria stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

Wh-What an iron grip! I...I can't move.

"No," she said. "I cast one healing spell on you already, but don't get up until I've finished another. You ought to feel honored—you're only the second man who's had the pleasure of resting his head on *my* lap."

"Y-You don't say." Despite my confusion, I did as I was told. Experience taught me that disobedience was not a winning move at times like this.

I looked around and saw no trace of the havoc we'd wreaked. The room had returned to its original state, although I couldn't fathom how. Warm daylight streamed in through the skylight. The broken dagger stood propped on its little shelf.

Linaria touched my head and began a healing spell as she said,

“Defective or not, you’re an odd duck as far as keys go. The ones I met during the age of strife and that wolf two hundred years ago did a lot more with their abilities, you know? You could have put up a decent fight if you’d linked with Atra’s mana.”

“I’m not fond of what I can do,” I responded slowly. “And I’m not certain what you mean by ‘key.’ If you know more about this power, I’d appreciate an explanation.”

“Oh, really? Well, I’m sorry to say I don’t know much either—only that the great elementals call people like you ‘keys’ and that you can link your mana with others’. All the keys but you had considerable mana of their own, and they could dismantle barriers and seals as easy as winking. I came up against them more than once during the war, and it was always a struggle.”

“I see. I suppose I really am ‘defective,’ then.” Without Atra’s help, I doubted that I could ever have lifted the seal on this place.

Linaria tousled my hair. “That wolf said, ‘There will be no more keys. I’m one of the last—all the more reason why I must fulfill our duty.’ Although, I can’t tell you what he meant, since I gave him a pair of daggers and sent him packing. Now, Allen of the wolf clan, it’s time you faced my judgment.”

“Excuse me?” I said, staring at her.

She’s quite pretty, now that I see her up close. She might even remind me of Lydia.

“First, mana!” Linaria pronounced, holding up her left index finger. “You barely have any!”

I groaned, hands pressed to my heart. *Must she put it like that?*

“Second, swordplay!” she continued, looking villainous. “You’ve mastered the basics, but that’s all!”

“W-Well, I’d hardly call myself a swordsman,” I retorted, my voice trembling.

Lydia must never know. I can practically hear her saying, “After learning from me? This calls for intensive training.”

“Third, unarmed combat! Not bad. I’ll give you points for daring. But if you tried that on the battlefield...” Linaria giggled.

Silently, I buried my face in my hands. My unarmed combat skills were the one thing I’d been secretly proud of.

“Fourth, magical control! Decent, but keep practicing. That last bit of camouflage was good.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” I replied, flustered by the sudden compliment.

“Finally, your courage and kindness are outstanding. You hesitated because my paintings were in your line of fire, didn’t you? You failed as a warrior...but *absolutely* not as a person. Your parents must be fine people.”

“I’m proud of them. And my sister too.” I nodded emphatically, then added, “Forgive me for using your dagger without asking.”

I never expected to break it.

Linaria shook her head. Light was beginning to leave her body. “It would have been lost to time if you hadn’t drawn it. I’m glad I got to feel their mana one last time. Thank you.”

“But...” I faltered.

She fell silent as well. At last, she said softly, “Then, listen to a little of my story. It won’t take long.”



I was born in the divine city, or so I’m told. Why am I not certain, you ask? Because the Etherhearts adopted me soon after I was born. But I suppose fire ran in my birth family. I mean, just look at my hair.

The Etherhearts are a positively ancient magical clan. I mentioned their founder earlier, remember? Yes, she was one of the last witches and the progenitor of botanical magic. Apparently, I have witch blood in my veins too, although not of the same line.

You don’t know what I mean by “witch,” do you? That wolf said more or less the same thing. So, I suppose...the race has finally died out. Even in my day, the direct Etherheart bloodline was diluted almost beyond recognition.

Now, where was I? A race of witches once inhabited our continent. I’m not speaking metaphorically—they were the real deal. They looked human, but I’ve fought one on the battlefield, and based on that experience...I’d say they were something else entirely. She called me a “mock witch”—since my blood wasn’t pure enough, she said.

Purely in terms of magical warfare, witches were probably the pinnacle of life on this planet—dragons and demonfolk included. Not that they were any slouches in close quarters; a witch could crush a vampire with her bare hands and laugh while she did it. Those are the sort of creatures the Etherhearts descended from.

I lived in the twilight years of a continent-spanning empire. The ruling class was rotten to the core, and rising powers surpassed the magic with which it had once dominated its neighbors. I’ve been carrying a sword and slinging spells as far back as I can remember. I hate to brag, but I was always the strongest person around, even as a child.

The head of the House of Etherheart at the time wanted powerful sorcerers, so I got a new little adoptive brother or sister practically every year. And the year after they came, they’d be gone. No, the Etherhearts didn’t do anything like you just imagined—the family simply wasn’t capable of it. They found all the children good homes,

or so I hear.

Anyway, when I turned thirteen and they sent me to study abroad in the Wainwright Kingdom, I only had one brother and one sister left. My little sister inherited a lot of Etherheart blood, although she came from a cadet branch. Yes, to the Royal Academy. I was technically a student, but my main job was to bring a seedling of the World Tree to the royal capital, plant it there, and encourage its growth.

Excuse me? “What’s the World Tree”? Good grief. I suppose even legends fade after five centuries. I don’t have enough time to get into the details now, but put simply, the World Tree is like a pillar propping up our planet. The Etherhearts tried to cultivate its seedlings and plant them all over the world. Although judging by the look on your face, I’d guess they failed. What a shame.

I enjoyed my life in the royal capital. My little brother and sister came to join me after a while, and I made friends too. I’d say it was the happiest time of my life.

I returned to the imperial capital when I was fifteen. Then everyone started going to war with everyone else. Why? I still don’t know. All of a sudden, the strife had engulfed the whole continent. But I suppose most things people do are just as hard to explain.

After that— You’ve read parts of my diary, haven’t you? It didn’t mention my name or anything about the Etherhearts? That’s strange. I remember writing a fair bit about them. Still, I wasn’t always in my right mind, so I might have erased those parts.

Yes, I did more than my fair share of fighting. And while I fought and fought and fought, a lot of people died—my adoptive parents, other members of our house, friends I’d made in the royal capital, comrades in arms...and my little brother, who loved me. When I was worn out from endless fighting, he went to battle in my place. Of course I tried to stop him! And what do you think he said to me—Grand Duchess Linaria Etherheart, Twin Heavens?

“Don’t you realize you’re a girl, Linaria?! I’m a man, and I swear I’ll keep you safe! When I come home, I’d like you to marry me.”

I was glad—overjoyed. I wept like a child when he said that. The only people who’ve ever treated me like an ordinary girl are my little brother and a certain eccentric, defective key.

But my brother never came home. He made himself a decoy to help his allies escape and met an honorable death in battle.

What? Isn’t my title countess? That’s what the histories say? What a silly question. The Etherhearts may have fallen on hard times, but we’re one of only eight houses in the world permitted a grand dukedom!

Now, are you quite finished interrupting? After that, well, a lot happened. The royal army launched a surprise invasion of the divine

city, so I fought them and ended up parting ways with my sister. That despicable vampire lord came to abduct a witch, so I kept incinerating the vile thing until it took. Those really were hectic days.

Excuse me?! Didn't my sister and I fight to a draw?! Ha! Of course not! The older sister is always stronger!

The empire was undeniably in decline, but it wouldn't have lost the war while it had me. The front lines were on foreign soil until I holed up here. Still, when my end came, there was no one left at my side.

I've forgotten who killed me or how. I suppose my instincts kicked in to shield me from an unpleasant truth. About the only thing I do remember is closing the seal with all the strength I could muster. The next thing I knew, I was here, lying next to Atra. As for why I stayed for five hundred years, the answer is simple—I could only exist on this sacred ground and inside the tower. I'd vanish if I left them. So I kept waiting for someone I could entrust Atra to. At least, until I suffered another betrayal.

Where are we? And what is that black gate? As for the latter, I'm as curious as you. I'm sure I could figure it out if I had the Etherhearts' hereditary library of ancient tomes, but it all burned to ashes when I fought my sister. All I can say for certain is that the gate isn't one of a kind. And that everything beyond them is a threat to the world.

I shut myself up here because I'd had enough. Drawn-out wars were getting me nowhere, so I decided to end them—using the great elementals.

I'd materialized the elementals for the first time in centuries, and believe it or not, I felt responsible for the rampant military expansion and slew of twisted spells that resulted. I suppose I was frightened into going to extremes. But my sister and I had only tapped into a fraction of the elementals' power. If I could make it mine, I could end the war. At least, I genuinely believed so at the time.

Once I saw Atra and the other elementals' smiles, though...



Linaria abruptly cut her story short and said, "What a shame—it looks like we're out of time. Oh, well. The end!"

I let out a yelp as my head passed through her legs and struck the floor. Rubbing my head, I sat up and then rose to one knee.

"Don't get careless!" the mighty witch chided, holding up her left index finger and flashing a teasing grin. "Especially not around lovely young ladies like me."

"I'll take that to heart."

"As you should!" She strode off, evidently satisfied, and hopped onto the table, where she spun with a dancer's elegance. Her long

crimson hair reflected the rain of sunlight in a stunning display. However...

I squinted. Linaria's body was slowly but steadily disintegrating into fine particles.

"I didn't get to tell you everything I would have liked to," she said, shrugging, "but that's life. There are plenty of things you're better off not knowing, and when you get down to it, my time ended long ago. Allen of the wolf clan, I leave Atra—the great elemental Thunder Fox—in your care. Keep her safe."

"I accept the responsibility. I swear by the name my parents gave me that I will defend her. Thank you," I responded gravely, rising to my feet and bowing. I doubted that more than a handful of others throughout history could claim the benefit of a personal lesson from Twin Heavens.

Linaria considered. "Is there anything left to discuss?"

"Let me think." A moment later, I let out a panicked "Oh! Please tell me the way out! And I'd appreciate anything you know about the people who bound Atra and the way to lift their marks of malediction! Also, what should I do if a great elemental inhabits a cursed child? Is it possible to free them?"

The path I'd taken to get here had closed behind me, so I would need to find another. And I couldn't forget about Atra, Tina, and Lydia either.

"A great elemental in a cursed child?" Linaria repeated, peeling off her right glove. "I've never heard of that happening. But don't worry—the great elementals love people. Come to think of it, that wolf two hundred years ago brought *two* cursed children with him too."

So, not even she knows the answer.

My thoughts were taking a turn for the gloomy when Linaria added, "Here. Catch," plucking something off her finger and tossing it to me.

"What's this?" I asked, catching a ring set with a red stone.

"The escape route is at the back of my chambers. That ring is the key. And remember: you *must* wear it on your right ring finger. It's magic, so it will change size to fit."

"All right," I said hesitantly, feeling a creeping dread as I slipped the ring onto my finger. I would be in mortal peril if Lydia or the girls found me wearing it.

"That was a gift from my brother to me," the witch informed me, with a lovely—yet mocking—smile. "You can't take it off unless you surpass my skill."

"What?!" Flabbergasted, I immediately tried to pry the ring loose. But it wouldn't budge.

I...I've been had!

"Multiple great elementals working together should be able to lift the curse on Atra," Linaria continued, looking positively beatific. "I'm sure they'll help you, knowing how compassionate they are, and you have a fair bit of time to work at it. But don't try linking mana with her until that mark is gone. She's not at her full strength, and she burns through too much mana when she gets worked up. As for who put those horrible chains on her—"

"They must at least have been a match for you. And affiliated with the Church of the Holy Spirit, to judge from their spell formulae," I interjected, setting the problem of the ring aside and looking Linaria full in the face.

She glared back at me. "Whoever devised the spells rivals the Saint. Their emissary called himself the current Sage."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Hero" was supposed to be the only legendary title passed down through the generations on our continent. Ancient records held that "Swordmaster" had been another in days of yore, but the title's current holder was no ancient champion. He had challenged Lydia during our time at the Royal Academy, lost, and now roamed foreign lands.

Could such legends still live? I recalled Gaucher, a knight of the Holy Spirit whom I'd fought in the eastern capital. "For the Holy Spirit and the Saint!" had been his war cry. Yet it couldn't be. Was the other side of this game board held by—

"I don't know whether he was genuine," Linaria said, with a hint of self-mockery, "but those chains are the same formulae the Saint once used against witches, and he knew about Atra and me. So be careful—if nothing else, this so-called Sage was strong."

I took a moment to digest that. At last, I said, "I understand." I would need to do some digging once I got out of here and sorted out the Algren rebellion.

The room was growing brighter. Linaria looked up, then back at me. "Well then, this is goodbye. I can't believe that the last person I met was an oddball like you. It's been a tumultuous life, but freeing Atra makes it all worthwhile! Oh, and even if you can't cast long-distance teleportation, you won't have trouble getting places as long as she's with you."

I thumped my chest. "Atra will be safe with me. And I'll leave this place undisturbed. I assume it will reseal itself—you seem the type to plan for after your passing."

Her library posed too great a risk. If its volumes reached the outside world, they could easily spark wars across the continent. Yet it was also the place where a lonesome, awkward witch and a little girl had passed their days together—and Linaria Etherheart's tomb. I

couldn't bring myself to burn it—my parents taught me respect for the dead.

“Mm-hmm, thanks,” Linaria said bashfully. “The seal will return when I’m gone, and I’ve arranged to have the whole island erased. It’s an old, old promise—made over a thousand years ago—but that family, the Alverns, will keep it. Oh, yes, and about your curse...”

I could hear the blood drain from my face. I would be dead in ten days unless I did something about it. “It slipped my mind,” I said with some difficulty, hastily checking my right wrist. The mark was clearly darker than before, but something about it seemed off.

Is this mana flowing from the ring?

“My ring can slow the spread while you wear it, and the curse is less potent on sacred ground,” the witch announced smugly from atop her table. “I also worked in spells to trace the caster and to alert you when great elementals are nearby. Now, what do you say to that?”

“When you were at school, did a boy ever dump you for being too much of a busybody?”

“H-How did you— My diary! You read that in my diary, didn’t you?!” she demanded, blushing furiously.

This must be the real Linaria, I thought, while I said, “Thank you. I truly appreciate it. As for the ring—”

“It’s yours now, so— Oh, we really are out of time.” A warm, dazzling light filled the room as Linaria stretched. “Mmm! Well, I’ll leave you with one last word of warning.”

“Yes?” I stood straighter and waited for the officious witch to speak.

She, however, gave an ominous chuckle and brightly chirped a curse: “You’re destined for trouble with women—it’s written all over your face! I’ve seen plenty of great men in my time, and you’ve got it worse than any of them! Congratulations!”

I pressed a hand to my forehead and sighed. Then, shooing her with my right hand, I snapped, “Just hurry up and go!”

Linaria stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at me as she faded into the light. Then, suddenly, I heard quick, light footfalls and felt a most tender embrace. “You’re a strong boy, Allen,” she said. “Very strong. There was no one like you—no wolf children—in that age gone mad. But that’s all the more reason you must never forget: no one shed tears for me, but a whole host of people will weep if you die! Don’t try to shoulder everything yourself or, someday, you’ll end up like me. Isolation is lonelier, sadder, and more painful than you know. So share the burden! You can’t imagine how happy the people around you will be to help if you let them! Show yourself a little more of the love and trust you have for other people. You taught me to trust people again, you know? That’s quite an achievement!”

After a long pause, she continued, “I’m glad I met you at the end. I’m glad you’re the one I’m leaving Atra with. Thank you. Thank you so, so much, from the bottom of my heart. Linaria Etherheart won’t forget this. Never—not even after I’m gone from our world. I mean...” The young woman who had protected a great elemental from the world all alone met my gaze and gave me a heartfelt smile. “You reminded me how warm people can be. Till we meet again.”





I woke slowly, murmuring, “Linaria.”

I started to sit up, then noticed Atra—a little fox-eared girl with long white hair—clinging to my left arm in her peaceful sleep and stopped myself. Ever so gradually, so as not to wake her, I extricated my arm and looked around. We were in the same bedroom that we’d reached the day before.

“Was it all a dream?” I wondered under my breath, then glanced at my right hand—and her gleaming ring. I closed my eyes, and my voice shook as I murmured, “Honestly. Whatever are we to do with a legend like you?”

I can’t begin to guess where this place is, and I don’t know if I’ll ever have the chance to return. Even so...

I clenched my right hand and pressed it to my heart. “This was a gift from your fiancé—a memento, I suppose. Yet you left it to me, along with those words of warning. You really are a busybody, my lady witch.”

Apart from my parents and Caren, the only people who have ever declared me a wolf are Dag, my martial arts teacher, Lydia, Alice, and now you. I’ll borrow your ring for the time being, but I promise, someday I’ll return to—

Suddenly, I felt myself the object of an intent stare. Atra sprang up, gave me a hug, and started rubbing her head against me, a little bundle of energy. After a short while, she looked silently up at me and stretched out her little hands toward my face.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure what to make of her gesture. Then I said, “Oh, sorry” as I realized that, unbeknownst to myself, I had been weeping.

“Don’t try to shoulder everything yourself,” Linaria had said, and her words had cut me to the quick. I was hopeless.

To the little girl, I said, “Atra, Linaria is gone.”

She looked puzzled, then gave my chest a feeble pummeling. Evidently, she was miffed.

“What?” I asked.

Atra was looking up at me, trying to communicate something.

“We can see her again?”

The girl settled down in my arms and began to sing—not a melody of parting but a wish for reunion, full of hope.

“It seems you should have taken your own advice. Look how much Atra loved you. That’s something to be proud of.” I dried my eyes on my sleeve, scooped the girl up in my arms, and got off the bed.

“All right!” I said, combing out Atra’s bed hair with my fingers. “I’m hungry. What do you say to breakfast?”

Atra chirped a happy note, wriggled out of my arms, opened the door, and dashed out.

“Ah! Hang on!” I cried. But just when I was about to give chase, my eye fell on the old, handmade wooden chair, and a stunned “What?” burst from my lips. Against it rested Linaria’s enchanted sword and rod. A white envelope and a stack of clothes lay on the seat. The letter within read:

A parting gift. Their names are Cresset Fox and Silver Bloom. Their mana’s nearly drained, and it will only recover slowly, but use them as you please.

I let out a hollow chuckle, aware of how strained I must have looked as I checked the other gifts: a fresh white shirt and black pants for me, and for Atra, a fine coat, little shoes, and a beautifully embroidered violet ribbon.

“She must have had these ready for the day Atra could finally leave. Unbelievable,” I grumbled, thinking of the overly officious witch while I gathered up the shoes and ribbon and made for the door. I couldn’t wait to show them to Atra.

After a meal of delicious fruits whose names I didn’t know and tea brewed from native herbs, we returned to the bedroom and immediately began preparing for our journey.

“Atra, come here,” I called.

The girl stopped excitedly inspecting the violet ribbon tied at the front of her head and her new shoes in the full-length mirror, and walked up to me.

“You should wear this,” I said, helping her into the lovely white coat I’d found on the chair. “It’s summertime, but the nights might still be chilly, and it’s dangerous to go barefoot. Linaria picked this out for you too.”

Atra’s ears and tail twitched happily as she raced around the bedroom, eyes shining. I set about changing my own clothes while I appreciated her heartwarming antics. Then, dressed in the brand-new white shirt and black trousers that Linaria had picked out for me in her last moments, I donned the robe my mother had given me. Even tattered as it was, I couldn’t bear to part with it.

Atra energetically hopped onto the bed and started stealing glances at me. It looked like she wanted to play.

“Hey now,” I chided. “Don’t do that with your shoes on.”

With a happy chirp, she burrowed under the covers and out of sight.

I packed a cloth bag I’d found after breakfast with several of those

nameless fruits and a flask of herbal tea, as well as a small medicine case and a few rolls of linen bandages. Then I walked over to the bed, seized the blanket, and, with a little whoop of effort, mercilessly commandeered it. I swiftly folded the blanket and added it to my sack, leaving a discontented Atra on the bed.

I chuckled as I lifted the enchanted sword Cresset Fox from its place against the chair and belted it around my waist. Then I lifted the enchanted rod Silver Bloom. Both weapons were of such superb quality that I shrank from even touching them.

"The sword will be better off in Lydia's hands," I murmured to myself. "I can't possibly make the most of—"

A twinge of pain from the ring on my right hand cut my musings short. I supposed it was finding fault with me.

I shouldered my bag and called, "Atra, time to go."

With a musical peep, the girl stood up on the bed and leapt lightly to my side.

"All right. Off we go!"

Atra sang her agreement, and we marched off toward a door I'd not yet tried. I waved my right hand over its heavy, dark-brown surface and sensed faint traces of mana, followed by a *shink* as it unlocked. One gentle push, and we were on our way.

After the bedchamber, we passed through more rooms than I could count. Eerie specimen rooms lined with rows of chemicals in glass jars. Rooms replete with arms and armor arranged in neat ranks. Storerooms packed with nothing but cloth and thread. Rooms of carelessly heaped gems, gold coins, and other treasures. There was no uniformity to their dimensions. Were we being teleported each time we passed between them? Or could all these different places be connected?

All the while, the ring emitted a thin crimson ray to guide us.

As we passed through a room stocked with specimens of bones the like of which I'd never seen before, I murmured, "I can't tell if she's overprotective or if she just *really* loves Atra."

The girl turned to give me a quizzical look, clutching an enormous monster fang in both hands.

I walked over, returned the fang to where she'd found it, and rubbed her head. "Don't mind me. But I think you'd be better off looking for, say, charming hats than old teeth."

She brightened and ran around me in a circle, the black bandages on her wrists and ankles flapping.

I really must lift that mark of malediction.

We came to the edge of the room. "Could this be the last one?" I wondered as I pushed on the door. It opened into a stone chamber lit

by ancient mana lamps. I detected a faint odor of salt, and when I approached a wall, I found it unsurprisingly rough to the touch. “So, we’re back in the tower on the Four Heroes Sea.”

Atra tugged on my right hand, excitedly pointing deeper into the room.

“Yes?” I responded, turning to look. My eyes fell on an imposing black door.

The escape route Linaria mentioned!

I glanced down at my hand. The mark covered more of my skin than it had when last I’d checked. I only had a vague notion of how many days had passed, but it looked as though I ought to return to the eastern capital as soon as I possibly could.

Atra shot me a puzzled look.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Now, let’s get this door open! Whoa! Settle down!”

The girl must not have understood me because she resumed gleefully racing around. A faint glow appeared at her feet with each step, then burst, spreading out like ripples on water. But numinous as the spectacle was, this was no time for play. Recalling that a young Caren had been only too happy for a chase when I’d lost my temper and run after her, I strode through the spreading ripples to the black door.

“I just hope there isn’t an eightfold seal on *this* one,” I muttered, holding out my right hand. The ring flashed crimson.

A spell formula appeared on the face of the black door, which swung open of its own accord. Beyond it stretched deep, deep darkness.

Atra wandered over, baffled by my failure to chase her, so I caught her with my right hand.

“There was nothing unfair about that,” I said in response to her protest. She still wasn’t satisfied, so I added, “*This* is what happens to bad little girls who run away!” A bit of tickling made her squirm, but it also restored her spirits.

The girl reached out toward me, so I scooped her up in a tight hug. She giggled in my arms. Linaria had lost her lover amid the fires of war, burned down half the eastern capital in a half-mad fury, and even formulated a strategic binding spell to capture the great elementals, yet she had given everything to preserve this smile—her rank, dignity, wealth, family, friends, homeland, and in the end, even her life.

Blazing Qilin, Stone Serpent, and Thunder Fox had been here, but Linaria had released two of them and stopped her nation from capturing a fourth. Yet I knew that Blazing Qilin and Stone Serpent had subsequently been stolen. And I still had no idea who had

betrayed her—who had been a match for Linaria Etherheart, Twin Heavens, the pinnacle of individual achievement. They must be a freak of nature. Even so—

Atra was giving me a baffled stare.

“Don’t mind me,” I told her again, throwing in a pat on the head that made her sway happily.

That reclusive, lonesome, officious young witch had defended this girl to the bitter end, even when all else failed. She may have meant it as atonement for her deeds in life, but I felt certain: Linaria Etherheart was worthy of the title Twin Heavens. I wished I’d had the opportunity to learn more from her. I mean...

“All modesty aside, you truly were a great person.”

Atra started pummeling me again, demanding an explanation.

“It’s nothing,” I assured her, bending down to reclose the front of her coat. “When we get back to the eastern capital, I’ll introduce you to my partner, my sister, and my students. Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane are inside two of them. I wonder if the other elementals will become like you.”

Atra goggled at me, then started jumping up and down. She was over the moon, if her ears and tail were anything to go by.

Why couldn’t Linaria release Atra alone?

I hadn’t had a chance to ask the witch directly, but I could guess: she’d been afraid. Afraid of the great elemental Thunder Fox being used to reenact the divine city’s tragic fate—of an endless cycle of destruction. As a student of history, I respected her judgment. The age of strife had seen great spells wielded time and again to win battles and take cities, if the chronicles were to be believed. And there were indications that taboo magic had been employed more than once in the War of the Dark Lord. Most people lacked Linaria’s strength...but the reclusive witch had known that they could be infinitely cruel when the need arose.

Atra gave me a hug, and I returned it.

In all probability, the enigmatic mastermind responsible for sending me here had even foreseen my freeing Atra and unsealing the black door. Otherwise, they would have kept throwing troops at the problem, heedless of their losses. Yet although I had cleared the greatest obstacle, Linaria’s seal, no fresh intruders appeared.

I recalled the Knights of the Holy Spirit’s tactics in the eastern capital. Their forces had made few concerted moves. Only Gaucher had shown his hand in combat, and his fight with Caren, Richard, and me had evidently been an experiment. Perhaps they saw the whole rebellion as no more than a means to take what they needed and to test their creations.

No, that couldn’t be, I told myself as I let go of Atra and stood up.

The Ducal House of Algren had led the bulk of the eastern nobility into this chaos, and even the Knights of the Holy Spirit were on the march. If...If that were all a blind, then the mastermind...

“Must be superhuman,” I murmured. “Whoa there!”

Atra was tugging on my left hand. Her message was clear: “Hurry up!”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s go.”

She yipped a happy note in answer as we advanced farther into the chamber.

I didn’t know how the war was progressing, but I had little fear for the Leinsters and Howards—they would never show an enemy mercy. As for the defense of the Great Tree, I could only pray.

In this age of waning magic, the mastermind possessed bountiful knowledge of the great spells. Sooner or later, they would come for Atra. But I’d given that lonesome witch my word that I would keep the girl safe, and I meant to keep it. As my dad had once told me, “Never break a promise, Allen—especially not a promise to the dead.”

Yes, I know. After all, I am your son.

I glanced down at the ring on my right hand and groaned, “Lydia, Caren, and Tina will blow their tops when they see this.”

Atra stared curiously at the ring, then her eyes lit up and she balled up her little fists. Apparently, she would come to my defense. I chuckled.

Hand in hand, we stepped into the black door. Immediately, the chamber door vanished behind us. So, this was a one-way trip. A faint, flickering glow showed our path forward.

She really does think of everything.

I looked back and nodded. “Farewell, Linaria Etherheart, Twin Heavens. Your sorrow, your regret, and your love for Atra all touched me. I promise I’ll come here again. Till then, I’ll borrow your sword, rod, and ring. I am Allen of the wolf clan, and I honor my word to the dead.”

Atra stared hard at me, then she turned too and waved her little hand at the vanished door with a smile on her face.

“Let’s come back here together,” I said. “No matter what.”

The girl nodded vigorously and piped her agreement. Then we turned on our heels and passed through the black door. It slammed shut behind us with a dull, heavy thud—locked tight against all comers.

The ray of light from the ring lanced out, spiraling ever upward. A field of countless stars twinkled.

Where on earth does this lead?

“At last, the exit,” I panted when I finally reached the top of the invisible staircase. The climb had seemed endless. On my back, Atra murmured happily in her sleep.

I stepped out of the darkness, brandishing my rod, and the inky void receded behind us. Soon, I could see where we stood: in a positively ancient stone ruin. Dappled sunbeams poured in through holes in the roof and gaps in the boughs above it. The structure was deserted and almost wholly consumed by trees. I touched a nearby stone wall, and it crumbled easily beneath my fingers.

“This must have been a lookout post,” I murmured. “Built during the War of the Dark Lord, or perhaps even the Continental War.”

I looked behind me and found that the impenetrable darkness was gone, along with the invisible spiral staircase. In their place, I saw only root-encrusted stone walls and floors.

So we can only pass this way once. Well, she did call it an escape route.

Atra poked her head over my shoulder.

“Rise and shine,” I said. “We’re here. Do you think you can walk on your own?”

The girl clambered down off my back, took a few steps forward, and stared around in wide-eyed silence. Soon, however, she returned and clung to my left arm, evidently frightened. I reshouldered my sack and struck the ground with the butt of my rod, silently casting Divine Lightning Detection.

It seems we aren’t on an islet, so this can’t be the same place I was taken to. Still...

I bent my knees and said, “Atra, it looks like there are some scary people up ahead. But don’t worry; I’ll protect you.”

The girl looked taken aback, then her ears and tail waved joyfully. I gave her little head a pat and dispatched several small magical birds through the holes in the roof.

Whoever I’m up against, it never hurts to be informed.

“Well then, let’s be on our way.”

Atra piped her agreement.

After leaving the ruins, I relied on botanical magic to forge a path through the trackless woods. In the meantime, my birds returned with news.

Oh dear. I hope we aren’t where I think we are.

Suddenly, Atra tugged on my left arm and pointed forward. The vegetation petered out ahead of us, and I caught a whiff of salt. One of my birds returned and alighted on the tip of my rod, alerting me that a troublesome force barred our path.

Is Lev with them?

I checked the ring—it was dormant.

“Atra,” I said, “I’ll take care of the scary people, so—”

The girl gesticulated wildly, apparently raring to go. I recalled Linaria’s warning: “Don’t try linking mana with her until that mark is gone.”

I crouched down and said, “Let’s go together. But you don’t need to link mana with me, all right? I’d like to test out this sword and rod.”

Atra nodded vigorously, wagging her tail with enthusiasm.

I deliberately lifted my sound-dampening spells and resumed walking. Before long, the forest waned, and we emerged onto a promontory. The nearby military encampment was clearly a recent addition to the landscape. Below us spread a vast sheet of water. Judging by what my birds had told me of the terrain, this was the Four Heroes Sea, the largest saline lake on the continent.

But unfortunately, we weren’t on the kingdom side. The encampment’s banners were emblazoned with a sword-bearing dragon.

“I never imagined we’d come out in Lalannoy,” I muttered as a profound unease stole over me. What were Lalannoyan soldiers doing with—

Several dozen black chains launched toward us.

“Whoa there!” To Atra’s surprise and delight, I drew the enchanted sword Cresset Fox. Its blade glinted as, with a single slash, I demolished our concealed attackers’ magical defenses and sent them tumbling into the sea alongside the remains of a strange box. I had seen a device just like it in the eastern capital. The spellcasters wore hooded gray robes and clutched single-edged daggers.

“Church inquisitors, is it?” I murmured.

Several heavily armored knights emerged from the encampment, bellowing, “We have you now, heretic!” They carried longswords and shields, and helmets completely hid their heads from view. An equal number of gray-robed sorcerers followed behind them, as did about twenty Lalannoyan soldiers. The latter wore military caps and light armor in white, with emblems on their chests, and targeted us with odd wooden poles—spell-guns.

Two Lalannoyan officers brought up the rear. One of them, a young dandy, drew his sword and barked, “Prepare to fire!”

“Mister Snider, Her Holiness wants them taken alive!” cried a knight of the Holy Spirit in the front rank, motioning for the others to stop. “Just as she foretold, they emerged from the Fire Fiend’s tower after two weeks had passed! We cannot fail in our duty!”

The dandy’s companion—a foppish-looking officer in a tricorn hat—shrugged and said, “Snider, let them have it their way.”

“But Captain Minié—”

“You *must* be sick of test firing after picking off all those nobles from the kingdom who tried to run for it when they saw which way the wind was blowing. Hey, you there! Lad! Don’t bother trying to fight! We don’t want to kill you or the tyke if we don’t have to!”

Atra darted behind me, startled by the loud shout.

So, the Saint prophesied our route. And extrapolating from what they just said...

I adjusted my grip on my enchanted weapons.

“Hey,” Minié said in a low voice, “didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you,” I replied. “The Algren rebellion is on its last legs. Besides which...”

Cresset Fox and Silver Bloom started radiating mana. The knights, inquisitors, and soldiers began to shift uneasily.

“While fighting in the eastern capital, I encountered strange boxes that rendered troops invisible—boxes much like the one you were just using,” I continued to Minié, keeping my voice level. “So, may I take it that the Lalannoy Republic was involved in the rebellion? That would certainly explain who armed the Black Knight, William Marshal, and his subordinates. And when aristocrats on islands in the Four Heroes Sea heard how the war was going and sought shelter in the republic, you turned on them and—”

“Fire!” the fop barked.

“Minié, wait!” Snider cried, but too late—the soldiers had already begun carrying out the instruction. Then, one after another, their spell-guns misfired, and the force lost all semblance of order.

“What?!”

“Ow!”

“Wh-Why?!”

“A...A misfire?!”

“This has never happened before!”

“Th-The barrel’s jammed with...ice?”

“I...I can’t melt it!”

“Forget the spell-guns! Draw your swords!”

The three knights of the Holy Spirit roared furiously (respectively: “Damn you!” “Mock beast!” and “What have you done?!”) and charged. An effortless, left-handed, horizontal stroke of my sword left them stunned and their bulky swords, shields, and armor in pieces. The shock wave sent the remains of the weapons tumbling over the cliff. A moment later, I heard them strike the water’s surface. For good measure, I gave the rod in my right hand a twirl, eliciting another startled cry as glittering silver ice—which I’d conjured silently and magically hidden from their notice—fastened tightly around all my enemies’ limbs and every weapon they still possessed.

Snider looked down at his own frozen spell-pistol, then glared at me and demanded, "Who are you?"

"Merely a humble tutor," I replied.

"Rot! Utter rot! What tutor could pull off a stunt like this?!"

"How rude. Now, I'm in a hurry, so I must be going." I shook my head, thrust my sword into the ground, and held my rod aloft. Massive magic circles began to form beneath my enemies' feet.

With a bellow and a "For Her Holiness the Saint!" the lead knight and inquisitor both shattered the ice binding them with the brute force of their mana and barreled forward in a last, desperate charge.

"Atra, stand back," I warned the little girl behind me, and she retreated a few paces.

Immediately, my magic circles converged—to my foes' further shock and dismay.

"Well then, gentlemen," I said, "please enjoy your summer swim."

A scarlet flash shot from the lip of the cliff ahead of us, splitting the ground with a rumble like thunder. A dust cloud rose as the promontory tumbled into the lake below.

For a moment, my gaze met Snider's, and he murmured, "Twin Heavens" before he vanished amid a colossal pillar of muddy water. Assuming he had a decent command of magic, he would probably survive.

I exhaled and gingerly returned the enchanted sword to its scabbard. Throughout that whole string of attacks, I hadn't drawn on any of my own mana—only the power imbued in Cresset Fox and Silver Bloom. They were tuned for Linaria's use, demanding the utmost precision. Even the slightest mistake could trigger a misfire. Her own spells had been even more delicate, but still—she must have been testing me with this gift.

Sighing, I collected a spell-pistol and a church insignia from the ground and added them to my sack. They would serve as material evidence, although I might still find myself accused of trespassing on and damaging Lalannoyan soil. The problem was...

"How do we get back to the eastern capital?"

Linaria had assured me that I could cross long distances with ease as long as I traveled with Atra, even without access to teleportation. However—

Atra tugged on my left sleeve and gestured that I should leave this to her. Then she began a silent song. Soon, I heard wingbeats in the sky above.

"Amazing," I murmured, breaking into a stunned smile.

The girl swelled with pride as a wild griffin alighted before us and humbly lowered its head in a deep bow. Perhaps the great elementals possessed the power to command magical beasts.

A beam of light shot from the ring, pointing toward the eastern capital.

“Shall we go?” I asked, with a firm nod.

Atra seemed willing, so I scooped her up in my arms and leapt astride the griffin. Naturally, it lacked a saddle, so I fixed us in place with wind magic. Then, stroking its neck, I said, “Please, fly for us. To the eastern capital!”

The griffin flapped its wings and launched itself skyward. Then we were soaring, following the light of the ring!

Atra squirmed excitedly in her seat ahead of me, the violet ribbon in her hair catching the breeze.

Now, let's put an end to this rebellion!

Chapter 3

“I-Impossible. H-How could the royal capital... True, I recalled the Violet Order, but we still had a hundred thousand troops in that city! How could it fall in a single night?! Y-You expect me to believe such a preposterous report?! Th-There must be some mistake, or— Of course! Our enemies seek to mislead us!” I roared, hammering my right fist on my desk.

My house’s great council hall, seat of supreme command in the eastern capital, reverberated to the sound of a mighty crack—an ominous thunderclap from beyond the windowpanes. Before me knelt the trembling Viscount Zad Belgique, who claimed to have escaped the royal capital by griffin a day earlier. He hardly *looked* like a liar, dressed in his blood- and battle-stained uniform—he had, by his own admission, discarded his armor and even his sword in his flight.

The shaken nobles and knights who packed the hall broke into a chorus of angry barks and frightened screams.

“The royal capital has fallen?!”

“Y-Your Highness, Duke Grant...”

“Who is responsible?!”

“The Howards or the Leinsters, surely.”

“But they’re pinned down on the borders!”

“Perhaps Lords Gardner and Crom grew tired of fence-sitting?”

“Two marquesses could never muster enough troops.”

“Then, strongholds and stations between here and the royal capital started dropping out of regular contact yesterday because...”

I took a few ragged breaths, then rounded on Belgique and demanded, “D-Did the royal capital truly fall in a single night? What became of Greck? D-Do you expect me to believe that the flower of our army was beaten so swiftly?”

The viscount looked up at me, deathly pale and utterly resigned. “The enemy marched under the command of Dukes Howard, Leinster...and Lebufera,” he answered. “Crom and Gardner have also sided against us, and their forces bar the routes between the royal and eastern capitals.”

Silent screams filled the hall. The whole assembly was terrified out of their wits.

It can’t be. It can’t, it can’t, it can’t!

The Howards had the Yustinian Empire to contend with, while the

Leinsters were equally preoccupied with the League of Principalities, and the Lebuferas, with the Dark Lord's armies. None of them could mount an immediate counterattack. Thus, once the royal capital was under our control, we would have several months—at least—to make our next moves. Those assumptions were *foundational* to the Great Cause.

And Lords Crom and Gardner took sides against us?!

I staggered backward and collapsed noisily into my chair. An oppressive silence hung over the hall. Yet the viscount seemed almost relieved.

"The royal capital garrison had occupied its outlying towns," he continued rapidly, "but Lord Greck recalled them due to difficulties with our supply lines, hoping to shore up the capital's defenses. Yet the withdrawal allowed the three dukes to take the townships while we were none the wiser. Before we knew what hit us, they stormed general headquarters, and His Highness went missing. The ducal armies then launched a three-pronged assault from the north, south, and west, and our forces were routed. I escaped on a griffin, riding day and night without rest to deliver the news to you here."

"Greck and Raymond reported no supply problems," I countered, less confidently than I would have liked. "I've heard of no retreat either. And despite the emergency you describe, we've had no word from the royal capital."

"I believe the loss of magical communications to be the work of demisprites in the enemy ranks. The flame-winged foe who stormed headquarters could hardly have been human."

Demisprites and some inhuman creature? I clawed at my hair. Greck had more troops than I personally command now. How can I possibly repel three dukes and all eight marquesses without them?

"We haven't lost yet, Grant," said an utterly unperturbed voice.

"Gregory..." I murmured slowly.

My second-youngest brother wore a hooded gray robe, and a man and a crone in the same garb followed at his heels. The man, if I remembered rightly, was called Lev and served the Church of the Holy Spirit. Gregory was usually content to fade into the background of a council, but he didn't seem to mind the doubtful gazes that congregated on him now as he strode up to the war map unfurled in the center of the hall.

"Even if the royal capital truly has fallen, our foes will need time to reach us here," he said, indicating the royal and then the eastern capital with a spindly finger. "And the east is our main stronghold—supply lines won't trouble us here."

"Tr-True," I agreed, startled to see my brother so uncharacteristically animated. "Y-Yes, you make a fine point."

He's right. We... We haven't lost yet!

"Hayden, Harclay! Give me your counsel!" I barked at the two aged grand knights—my house's "Wings"—who thus far had kept their arms folded and their thoughts to themselves.

"I've nothing to add," responded Haig Hayden.

"Ours is but to obey orders," Haag Harclay added.

"This is no time for reticence!" I snapped, seizing the enchanted halberd Deep Violet—symbol of Algren dukes—from its place beside me. "You and the wounded Zaur Zani were my father's pet generals, but defeat would be as ruinous for you as for the rest of us! Anyone can see that the whole eastern aristocracy will face a bitter purge if we lose this war! Now, speak your minds!"

I must win! And I'll use every piece at my disposal to achieve victory!

Hayden and Harclay didn't open their eyes, but they did force themselves to speak.

"I believe Lord Gregory has the right of it. We surely have some leeway to prepare."

"But we also have enemies at our backs here in the eastern capital."

"First, the Great Tree!" Gregory exclaimed, tapping the eastern capital on the map with his finger. "The Knights of the Holy Spirit have temporarily withdrawn beyond our borders because they call our failure to take it a breach of trust. Should it fall, however, we may depend upon their reinforcements."

His words hung in the air for a few moments.

"I see," I said at last. Then I paced up to my brother and, with a sharp grunt of exertion, shocked the hall by bringing my halberd down on the map. Although the enchanted weapon remained silent, unwilling to unleash its power, it nevertheless split the whole table asunder. Surveying the assembly, I roared, "Seize that damnable tree at any cost! Kill all who resist! We shall triumph! For our cause is just!"

"To victory! Our cause is just!" the whole company roared back, right fists in the air. "Long live His Highness, Duke Grant!"

With that cheer, they raced out of the hall to issue orders to their respective forces. Their fighting spirits were still unbroken!

"Well spoken," I said, placing a hand on Gregory's shoulder. "I'll take command on the front line. Henceforth, you will oversee our rear."

"I...I am unworthy of the honor," he responded weakly. "U-Um... About Gil..."

"Decide such trivialities yourself!"

"O-Of course." Gregory glanced at the gray-robed man behind him. "Also, I'd like to send Lev to aid in storming the Great Tree."

“You have my leave.”

“Most gracious of you. May fortune favor you, my brother.”

“May it indeed! Hayden! Harclay! I want you in the van. Show me what the Algren Wings can do! And surely Zaur can still fight? Bring him with you!”

The old grand knights bowed reverently.

“Yes, sir.”

“As you wish.”

There was something about their demeanor I couldn’t stomach. It reminded me of the pitying look that my fool of a father—Guido Algren, now comatose—had given me before I launched the Great Cause. But so long as Deep Violet was mine, they would never betray me.

I strode boldly out of the hall.

Just you watch, father. I’ve only just begun to fight. And when the dust settles, I, Duke Grant Algren, shall stand victorious!



“What?!” I exclaimed, trying to rise. “Anna, is that tr— Yowch!”

“Stay still, Young Master Richard,” chided the Ducal House of Leinster’s head maid as my pain got the better of me. “I’ve had no word from Celenissa since I sent her back to report, but given the loss of magical communications and the panic in the Ducal House of Algren, it seems natural to assume that our allies have liberated the royal capital.”

We were in the fortified position between the Great Tree and what had been the Great Bridge before Caren collapsed it with a jaw-dropping lightning spell. Anna had accosted me and forced me—despite my protestations—to have my wounds treated. My yelp of pain brought a snicker from the knights, militia, and volunteers around us.

“I’ve told you I don’t need healing. I can move just fine,” I grumbled, scowling at the pale-aqua-haired girl who was applying medicines to my injured arm from a box in her other hand—Nico, the maid corps’s number seven.

“I won’t hear of it,” Anna chirped.

“My lord,” said Nico, “your wounds are serious, to put it mildly.”

I looked around, hoping for help in the face of this flat refusal, but everyone took one glance at Anna’s and Nico’s faces and scattered.

Ten days had passed since Caren set out for the west to invoke the Old Pledge. The loss of the bridge had done much to stymie the rebels, and the beastfolk chieftains had finally joined the fight, employing their botanical magic to build masterful fortifications. Nathan and the other artificers, meanwhile, had supplied us with a variety of magical

implements made from abandoned enemy matériel. As a result, we were suffering far fewer casualties, freeing the skilled healer Shima of the hare clan to lead Shizuku of the goat clan and other young militia members back inside the Great Tree, where they once more formed a dedicated medical unit. To top it off, Luce—a sea-green griffin with pure-white plumage that the wolf clan’s legendary Shooting Star had ridden in the War of the Dark Lord—had led its flock to the defense of the Great Tree.

Small wonder we now had time to waste tending to scrapes and scratches that we would once have ignored. And if the royal capital was back in friendly hands, our hardships might well be coming to an end.

“Anna, do you suppose the rebels will throw everything they’ve got at us?” I asked.

“I’m certain of it,” the head maid replied while preparing a pot of the tea she’d brought with her. “Moving tens of thousands of troops from the royal capital to the eastern will be a difficult undertaking, even with the aid of railroads. I suspect that the rebels mean to make a final bid for the Great Tree before our allies arrive.”

“Probably,” I conceded. “And leading the charge...”

“Will be the Two Wings of the Algrens, Grand Knights Haig Hayden and Haag Harclay, at the head of the Violet Order and the Algren guard. Earl Zani may join them, if his wounds permit it.”

“We’ll be hard-pressed if they try to overwhelm us.”

“Not to fear, Young Master Richard! Simply hurl a few Firebirds into their ranks and then lay into them with your Scarlet Sword!”

“Don’t ask the impossible.” Weary of the slender, chestnut-haired head maid, I turned to the girl bandaging my arm and asked, “Nico, where’s Jean?”

“With Mrs. Ellyn,” she replied.

“With Ellyn?” I parroted, nonplussed.

Ellyn was the mother of Allen, who had earned himself the nickname “Brain of the Lady of the Sword” for the feats he’d performed with my little sister Lydia. He was also the idiot who had dumped the defense of the Great Tree in my lap and appointed himself our rear guard. As long as I lived, I would never forget the look on Ellyn’s face when we’d made it back here and reported what he had done. I hadn’t believed that anyone could reach such depths of despair—or love. Allen shared none of her blood, but I would give my word that she was his mother.

“Jean’s relationship with her own mother is rather fraught, but she’s much needier than you’d think,” Nico explained, frowning. “Mrs. Ellyn kindly tended to her wounds, and Jean has been quite taken with her ever since.”

“Oh.”

The Leinster Maid Corps was a strict meritocracy. My house had done away with butlers more than a decade ago, after ours had tried to kidnap Lydia. As a result, our maids' authority had grown by leaps and bounds. In wartime, officers of the corps took precedence over many nobles. And they came from a hodgepodge of backgrounds: Anna was Yustinian, by her own admission. Her second-in-command, Romy, hailed from the southern isles, and Nico, from the city of water. Jean was a westerner, or so I'd heard.

“Young Master Richard, we consider the Leinster Maid Corps to be our family,” the head maid added, gracefully pouring a cup of black tea. “And, begging your pardon, we feel the same toward your house.”

“Really? I guess that makes you my au—”

A teaspoon scythed through the air, claiming a few strands of my bangs unlucky enough to fall in its path. “Did you say something, Young Master Richard?” Anna asked brightly.

This calls for the secret technique I learned in my youth!

“No, not a thing.” I laughed, raising my hands high in token of unconditional surrender.

“Your lordship's resourcefulness is a lesson to us all,” Nico said earnestly, stoppering a little vial of magical salve. “There, all done.”

I flexed my right arm. Not so much as a twinge!

“Thank you,” I said. “Not even healing magic could touch that pain, and you cured it completely.”

“I merely did my duty,” Nico responded aloofly, turning toward the Great Tree. “I'll call Jean.”

And she used to be so winsome.

Anna tittered as she served my tea and remarked, “Ah, youth.”

“What about it?”

“Oh, nothing. Merely talking to myself.”

I glared at the beaming head maid while I lifted my teacup and took a sip. Delicious.

A now-familiar guffaw burst from behind me. “You look like you're enjoying yourself, Lord Red! But being dense ain't a virtue.”

“Dag,” I said, turning in my chair, “I'd say I'm as perceptive as the next—”

“Whoops!” Anna caught my teacup as it slipped from my hand.

Behind the old otter stood Bertrand and several more veteran knights of the royal guard. Someone seemed to have given them first aid, but they were still covered in wounds, and their clothes were splotted with the black of dried blood.

“Bertrand,” I gasped, starting to my feet. “All of you.”

“Richard,” he said hoarsely, “thank...thank goodness you're safe.”

Neither of us could utter another word. I clenched my teeth—so

few of the old soldiers had made it back. Still, I was their vice commander, and I had my duty. I clicked my heels together, saluted, and said, in a trembling voice, "Sirs, I truly...truly commend you on a duty well done."

"Salute!" Bertrand barked, and the battle-hardened knights returned my gesture.

"I have so many questions," I said, lowering my hand. "But first: What of Allen?"

My right-hand man was a veteran company captain. He never showed weakness, even in the face of death. Yet his shoulders trembled, and tears filled the eyes of the other battle-hardened knights.

"Mr. Allen fought...fought valiantly," Bertrand said. "We'll be proud to have stood alongside him to the end of our days. But we...we failed to defend him. He saved our lives and..." At that point, words failed him, and he began sobbing.

Allen saved Bertrand and the other veterans?

"The former fox-clan chieftain said the same thing," Dag added, chewing on his pipe. "That fool held the line until the last possible moment, then tossed the survivors into the canal. Can you believe it, Lord Red? He weighed his own life against not just his comrades in arms but the old curmudgeons who wanted nothing to do with him, and he chose *them* without a second thought. He should've run—he'd earned the right! But...But the numbskull went and..." Tears rolled down the old otter's face.

I laid a hand on his shoulder. "We'll be the ones to save Allen," I said firmly. "And give him a good wallop while we're at it!"

Dag wiped his eyes and grinned. "Now there's an idea," he said. "I won't be happy till I've socked him good and proper!" He puffed at his pipe as he elaborated, "I was using the underground waterways, scouting out the rebels and trying to track our traitor chieftains, Nishiki of the ape clan and Yono of the rat clan, when I picked up your knights. And who d'you think I found with them? Sui's bride-to-be! I already brought 'em back together, and you should've seen him blubber. She says her long-lost sister broke her out of a dungeon, if you can believe it. I couldn't find the traitors, but I'm dead sure they took the underground waterways east."

"You found Momiji?!"

Sui said he hasn't seen her since the first day of the insurrection. And it sounds like the beastfolk traitors are already out of the country.

"What happened, Bertrand?" I demanded.

"I'll fill you in on the move," replied the miraculous survivor. "The rebels are about to throw everything they've got at us. Man the defenses!"

Dark clouds covered the sky, blotting out the sun. Enemy forces massed at the opposite end of the fallen bridge. Judging by their banners, the Violet Order and the Algren guard were indeed in the vanguard.

“Bertrand, I know you’ve seen the healers, but should you really be back on the battlefield?” I asked my senior comrade, who wore light armor borrowed from the beastfolk militia.

“Of course,” he replied, stroking his gray-streaked beard as he surveyed the enemy ranks. “The rebels will be desperate to overwhelm us this time. Every able fighter should be here to meet them.”

Only the beastfolk leaders—both clan and militia—knew our speculation about the recapture of the royal capital. If we let our guards down, we would be crushed under the sheer weight of numbers.

More sea-green griffins than I could count flew around the Great Tree, poised to strike without mercy if our enemies tried to restore the bridge and cross.

“Magical beasts keeping a two-hundred-year-old promise?” Bertrand murmured, looking up at the sky. “I wish people were that loyal.”

“Maybe they are,” I said. “If the royal capital is back in friendly hands, then the western Lebuferas must have—”

“Vice Commander! Movement in the enemy ranks! They’re coming!” shouted Valery Lockheart. Despite being the youngest knight in the guard, she’d fought through this whole upheaval without suffering a single wound. Some had even taken to calling her “Lucky” lately.

Knights armored head to toe in violet were advancing, greatshields raised, while sorcerers used earth magic to create a path for them.

“Anna, how do you read the enemy tactics?” I asked, glancing at the head maid, who waited with Nico and Jean at the rear of our lines.

“A frontal assault, I daresay,” she replied. “Still...something doesn’t sit right with me.”

Haig Hayden and Haag Harclay were seasoned generals; they had to know how exposed their troops would be to offensive magic while they forded the canal. The militia captain, Rolo of the leopard clan, who was back on the front line courtesy of Nico’s medicines, looked as puzzled as I was.

“Richard! The militia’s ready whenever you need us!” shouted Sui of the fox clan, running up to me.

“Should you really be here, Sui?” I asked.

“Why not? I’m all healed up,” replied the puzzled young man in a tattered martial arts uniform, who had so recently reunited with his fiancée, Momiji Toretto.

“I don’t mean that. Should you really have left Momiji?”

“What?! Wh-What’re you talking about? I...I don’t—”

“Want to be with her?”

“Of *course* I want to be with her, you— Ah!”

His swift retort drew a hearty laugh from the ranks. Militia Chapter Leader Toma of the bearlet clan was in stitches.

Good. Now everyone’s nice and relaxed.

I winked at Sui, who responded with a curse and a muttered “I’ll clobber you later.”

Enemy sorcerers began working to restore the fallen bridge in earnest. It would be so easy to attack them. And yet...

Sui twitched his nose and murmured, “Those old-timers are missing.”

“Old-timers?” I echoed. “Who do you— Damn! Nico! Search for Zaur Zani’s mana!”

“Yes, my lord!” The pale-aqua-haired girl immediately sprang into action. Her skirt flapped as she swung her staff in a wide arc, conjuring a large flock of watery birds, which she launched in all directions. Those flying directly above our formation vanished one after another.

“Drat! Rolo, the frontal assault is for support and a diversion! Their main force is—”

Three voices called out from above.

“Well spotted.”

“But too late!”

“See what you make of this!”

With that, a hail of lightning spells pelted down on us.

“Dear me,” Anna said as she tore through the barrage with her strings.

I grunted as I blocked a spear thrust from one of the three old men who had just appeared. Jean, the maid corps’s number ten, roared, “Looks like fun!” as she did the same.

Fierce sparks flew, but we repelled them after a brief clash. The two old knights landed on the broken near end of the Great Bridge, accompanied by an aged sorcerer who wore a wide-brimmed hat and a patch over one eye and gripped a timeworn spell-lance. These were the Algrens’ famous Wings—Grand Knights Haig Hayden and Haag Harclay. The third man was Earl Zaur Zani, renowned for his deep learning.

A moment later, a strange box dropped into the canal. Overhead, the griffins that had carried it and our three foes wheeled frantically,

fleeing sea-green pursuers.

So, they crossed the canal by air while a Lalannoyan contraption masked their approach.

Hayden and Harclay readied their long spears.

“Lord Leinster and brave warriors of the beastfolk.”

“Though we have no quarrel with you, we cannot turn back.”

The old knights’ mana swelled as they bellowed in unison,
“Victory shall be ours!”

A three-man suicide attack?

I raised my sword and barked, “Knights of the royal guard, don’t let enemy troops cross the river! Bertrand, take command! Anna, Jean, the three of us will handle the old men! Nico, watch our backs!”

“Yes, sir!” my knights roared back, while the maids responded, “It will be my pleasure,” “Leave ’em to me!” and “Yes, my lord,” respectively.

“Toma, strengthen our guard before the Great Tree!” Rolo shouted. “Sui, assist the royal guard! The rest of you, stop any more enemies from crossing that canal! Chieftains, keep our fortifications mended!”

The militia answered with a hearty “Right!” and the chieftains, with a firm “Understood!” The sense of urgency was mounting by the moment.

I wove a fire spell on the tip of my sword. Anna smiled and spread her arms wide. Jean rested a single-edged sword on her shoulder and flashed her pointed canines. Nico was busy conjuring a pride of water lions.

Then, just when battle was about to be joined, an enormous magic circle appeared in the sky above the Great Tree. Its design reminded me strongly of flower petals.

Friend and foe alike stared upward, dumbfounded by this unbelievable spectacle. All but the softly chuckling Angel of Death.

“Oh, what a shame,” Anna said, casting a pitying glance at the grand knights and their companion. “It appears you’re out of time. But don’t consider yourselves hard done by—such things often happen on the battlefield.”

“Anna,” I slowly forced myself to ask, my eyes still locked on the heavens, “what on earth is that?”

The head maid pressed her hands together and cheerily explained. “You look upon magic that the chieftain of the western demisprites, the Flower Sage Chise Glenbysidhe, spent a century devising to assault the demonfolk: the strategic teleportation spell Phantasmal Falling Star-Blossom. Now, watch closely, ladies and gentlemen. This is a rare sight, and I’d hate for you to miss it!”



We plunged into the magic circle that hung over the royal capital like a blooming flower. Then the Great Tree towered into view.

"Incredible," I murmured, awestruck.

"W-We teleported from the royal capital!" Ellie exclaimed, equally astonished. We were flying our griffins side by side but needed our communication orbs to hear each other.

How can such a spell be real? It's like something out of a fairy tale.

"Lynne! Ellie! Stella! Caren! Look there!" Tina shouted, pointing down at the Great Bridge before the tree. She had been the first to fly into the circle.

Before us, friend and foe faced off across the chasm where the bridge had been. On the Great Tree side, three people with potent mana were squaring off with my dear brother Richard, along with Anna and her maids.

Behind us, the magic circle vanished in a scatter of petals and a flicker of light. According to Chieftain Chise, the first cast was merely a test to fine-tune the teleportation coordinates. The second would be on a larger scale and require some time to prepare. So, as an advance detachment, we would need to buy time until my dear mother, Lily, and the rest of our forces arrived!

"Let's go!" Tina called, unlimbering the rod slung across her back and looking over her shoulder at us. "If my comrade is right, Lydia is on her way here!"

Hero Alice had said—once she had woken up—that "The crybaby will head for the eastern capital, wrecking trains and anything else she can find on the way. I have enough time to slip out for a snack. Later."

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie responded.

Snapping back to the present, I shouted, "I don't need you to tell me—Above you!"

The sea-green griffins circling overhead flapped their wings and dove toward us. I felt a buffeting wind as Caren's own griffin sped forward.

"Luce!" Caren shouted, drawing her black dagger. "It's me! I came back!"

A pure-white griffin in the center of the flock let out a piercing screech. I could sense its joy. The griffins that had moved to attack us swerved and rejoined the flock. Then several hundred sea-green griffins all dove at once, assaulting the army on the far bank of the canal!

Even from this distance, I could hear the bellows and shrieks of the soldiers. Offensive magic filled the air, kicking up fierce gusts. A mounted man in the center of the rebel force—their general, I

supposed—flailed madly with his halberd.

“Now, charge!” Lady Stella cried boldly as her griffin swooped past ours. Caren followed, and they both leapt off without waiting to land. Their now riderless griffins flew off toward the Great Tree.

Lady Stella drew her wand and rapier in midair and cast a levitation spell just before she hit the ground. She and Caren alighted softly right in between the allied and enemy lines.

“Oh, Stella...” Tina murmured with an admiring gasp.

“M-Ms. Caren is co sool,” Ellie added. Both had sparkles in their eyes.

She’s even mastered levitation? I thought, chagrinned, and directed my griffin to descend.

Tina and Ellie fell in behind me, shouting, “Hey! Lynne!” and “P-Please wait for us!”

“Dear Brother Richard!” I called. “Anna! Everyone!”

Astonished cries of “Lynne!” “Lady Lynne!” and “My lady!” greeted us as we landed our griffins before the allied lines. I drew my dear sister’s sword.

Of the enemy forces, only two knights and one sorcerer had already crossed the river. Still they were unmistakably seasoned warriors—unperturbed even as the main rebel force panicked behind them.

“Those two are grand knights, Haig Hayden and Haag Harclay,” Caren informed us, entering Lightning Apotheosis. “The old sorcerer behind them is Zaur Zani. They’re all fearsome opponents, so don’t let your guard down.”

“First, allow me to introduce myself,” said Lady Stella, boldly meeting the elderly earls’ eyes. Pale-azure snowflakes began to dance around her, mingling with the last of Chieftain Chise’s flower petals in an enchanting spectacle. “I am Duke Howard’s eldest daughter, Stella Howard. Harclay, Hayden, I don’t believe we’ve met since that palace ball three years ago. And I take it your companion is Earl Zani, renowned as the finest scholar in the east of our kingdom. In brief: surrender. You no longer have any hope of victory.”

She struck me as self-assured, imposing, almost sublime. And I felt certain that she had my dear brother to thank for that awe-inspiring confidence.

“My, how Lady Stella has grown,” Anna cooed, gliding stealthily in front of me. “Would you please keep behind me, my ladies?”

It was an order phrased as a request. I dropped my gaze and murmured feebly, “Anna, my dear sister...my dear sister has—”

“Lady Lynne, Lady Lydia is no longer alone. She has you young ladies—and Mr. Allen,” Anna declared most emphatically, her gaze always fixed straight ahead, and spread her arms wide. “So, what do

you say we make this quick?"

Hayden and Harclay readied their spears.

"We failed to anticipate strategic teleportation magic."

"Even so, we are not yet vanquished."

Both grand knights swept their spears sideways, conjuring tempestuous whirlwinds!

Ten casts of the advanced spell Imperial Storm Tornado?!

"We are steadfast in our resolve!" Zani roared, deploying a veritable arsenal of lightning spears and axes on his spell-lance. "And we shall obliterate all who stand in our way!"

Anna took another step forward.

Tina and Ellie cried, "Stella!" and "M-Ms. Caren!" at almost the same moment.

"Let us help you!" I shouted with them.

But Lady Stella flashed a fearless grin and said, "Leave this to us."

"Anna! Take care of the girls!" Caren called, equally undaunted, then broke into a run. She never seemed to stop gaining speed.

The aged grand knights looked grim as they brought down their spears.

"So, you choose to fight."

"But we shall give no quarter!"

All ten tornadoes launched forward to assail our upperclassmen. But Lady Stella, who hadn't moved a step, swung her wand and rapier and conjured two ice-winged birds in the air before her—the supreme spell Frost-Gleam Hawks! They swiftly dispelled the whirlwinds amid a confusion of snowflakes, freezing the bridge beneath them as they flew.

"An unknown supreme spell?!" Zani exclaimed in astonishment even as he unleashed his own magic. A barrage of lightning spears and axes pelted the hawks while the grand knights raised barriers and attempted to halt their advance.

"Remarkable!"

"Magnificent, but we aren't beaten yet!"

Caren hurled her dagger skyward. "Stella's not the only one you're up against!" she shouted, sprinting past the grand knights with a crackling cross-headed spear in her hands and a mantle of lightning in the form of a wolf's head!

She struck at Zani with a series of staggeringly quick thrusts. The elderly sorcerer let out a grunt of surprise but parried the blows with his spell-lance and rolled along the ground to gain distance, sending his hat tumbling down into the canal. He was amazingly nimble for his age.

The grand knights bellowed with effort, focusing all their might into their magical defenses. The Frost-Gleam Hawks disintegrated into

a sudden blizzard.

“Can you believe it?” I gasped in admiration. “True, they had support, but they still stopped a supreme spell.”

“Then we’ll just keep firing until they fall!” Tina snapped, raising her rod. “Ellie!”

“Yes’m!” Ellie responded, beginning to weave spells of her own.

Ahead of us, Lady Stella swung her wand and rapier, and her Frost-Gleam Hawks rematerialized. Caren, meanwhile, let off ferocious bolts of violet lightning as she hefted an even larger lightning spear. The white sea-green griffin was wheeling directly above them.

I heard footsteps, and then my dear brother Richard stood at Anna’s side. “Hayden, Harclay, Zani,” he said sorrowfully, “it’s hopeless. Lay down your arms, and I’ll guarantee your safety. But tell me just one thing: Why? Why did old Duke Guido Algren allow this farcical rebellion?”

The three old men were gloomily silent. On the opposite bank, their forces were still desperately fending off the griffins’ assault—panicked but evidently determined to hold their ground.

Haig Hayden shifted to a two-handed grip on his spear. “Lord Richard,” he said, “we truly...truly appreciate your offer.”

Haag Harclay raised his long weapon in an overhead stance. “Yet Duke Guido Algren is our master.”

Zaur Zani brandished his spell-lance aloft. “And though we will not forget your generosity, we will abide by what we were taught.”

All three elders’ eyes flashed with warrior spirit as they roared in unison, “A knight is a defender of his lord’s will! And we are knights of Duke Guido!”

Their overflowing mana made my skin tingle. Why would such accomplished fighters side with the rebels?

My dear brother Richard narrowed his eyes and grasped the hilt of his sword. Then, without warning, Anna swept her left hand in a wide arc. Her invisible strings sliced into the edge of the Great Bridge, scattering shards of ice.

“I simply cannot abide voyeurism,” the head maid frostily declared.

“Oh? I’m surprised you noticed.” Space distorted, and a man appeared. He wore a hooded gray robe and carried a staff and a handful of talismans—just like Racom and Rolog, the church inquisitors we’d faced at Avasiek.

Caren and Lady Stella looked grim.

Our elderly opponents scowled and addressed the interloper.

“I know you.”

“You serve Lord Gregory.”

“Lev! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Surely you were informed? I’m here to reinforce you—and to perform a few experiments. After all...” Lev leered disconcertingly at Lady Stella. “It appears Lady Howard has mastered a new form of supreme magic. Fascinating.”

Rage crept into Caren’s lightning. “Where...Where have you taken my brother?!” she demanded, darting forward in a wild charge!

Lev threw a talisman. A harsh, metallic clang and a crackle of electricity ensued as sinister mana scattered all around us. A longsword had emerged from a summoning circle in front of Lev, blocking Caren’s strike. The next thing I knew, a whole knight had appeared, fully armed and armored with a longsword, greatshield, heavy plate, and a helmet through which only the warrior’s eye was—

“I...I know that eye!” Caren cried. “It’s just like Gaucher’s was when—”

She let out a shriek as the knight hurled her backward. Lady Stella and Anna caught her, crying, “Caren!” and “Miss Caren!” respectively.

Then icy blossoms blew past me on turbulent gusts. My friends had finished their spell.

“Everyone, please stand back!” Ellie cried.

“Let us try!” Tina shouted, and the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf let out a howl from within the ice storm that shrouded it.

The compound spell they cast during our mock duel with Lady Stella?!

The wolf of ice launched into a furious charge toward the mystery man and his knight. At the same time, the old earls took evasive action, muttering, “Can it be?” “More supreme magic!” and “Are these the fruits of *his* instruction?”

The knight stood his ground, his one visible eye glowing an uncanny red. Why didn’t he dodge?

An instant later, the Blizzard Wolf struck him head-on! A snowstorm raged, freezing the greatshield he raised to stop it. I could see the effects of the clash transforming the broad canal below into a river of ice, and cold mist filled the air.

“Tina, did you hit him?” I called, keeping my gaze on her right hand as I stepped forward. The mark of Frigid Crane shone on the back of it, and a spell formula showed through the azure ribbon on her wrist.

“Definitely!” she called back. “But it feels kind of gross.”

I glanced at Ellie. She hadn’t relaxed either. And neither had Lady Stella, Caren, Anna, or my dear brother Richard. The inquisitors whom we had faced at Avasiek had been monstrous. It was difficult to believe that a single strike, even from a supreme spell, could—

A barrage of huge umbral needles burst through the icy mist, aimed squarely at us! What was this attack?!

“Allow me!” Anna said brightly. A wave of her left hand sent a

flash of light racing through the whole area, cleaving through every needle and lifting the mist as well.

The knight was frozen solid but still standing. His helmet shattered, and what lay beneath stunned us into silence. Most of the knight's head was covered by a writhing spell formula. I could see the aged warriors glaring sharply at Lev, but the inquisitor merely cackled with delight.

"Splendid, splendid," he said. "I'm impressed that you managed to counter my new spell so effectively."

"Sir Gaucher of the Knights of the Holy Spirit used that spell after he became a monster," my dear brother Richard said harshly. "Lev, I believe your name was. What have you done to that knight? And unless I miss my guess, those black needles came from no ordinary magic either."

Lady Stella murmured, "It's like the sham Resurrection embedded in those spell-soldiers."

"This is an experiment," the man replied, spreading his arms. "I have more fine specimens than I know what to do with—in the form of your kingdom's former knights."

We froze, shocked by this unforeseen revelation.

Tina glared at Lev while she wove a second Blizzard Wolf on her rod. "You mean the Black Knight's men who went missing after Gerard's attack, don't you?" she demanded. "You implanted them with Resurrection against their wills! And you did something unnatural to yourself as well!"

"Precisely," Lev admitted, eyeing Tina with interest. "I bestowed a great power upon them. Oh, praise be to Her Holiness! Now, I think that's enough chitchat. I have business in the Great Tree. Would you kindly make way for me?!"

He produced a dozen or more talismans and threw them. A troop of fresh knights emerged from space-bending summoning circles and formed a battle line!

"An army of knights armed with Resurrection?" Caren groaned. "This won't be easy."

"But we can't afford to retreat," Lady Stella said firmly. "We're going to bring Lydia to her senses and rescue Mr. Allen. And as long as we're together, this will be no trouble for us. Isn't that right, Caren, Tina, Ellie, Lynne?"

I couldn't help staring at her in admiration. Tina and Ellie seemed equally taken, blushing slightly as they murmured, "She's so grown-up" and "And so pretty."

Lev laughed derisively. "You're quite the comedian, Lady Howard. I admit your supreme magic is powerful, but do you truly imagine you can overcome this many spell-soldiers?"

“Not on our own,” Lady Stella readily admitted, shaking her head with a mischievous look that reminded me of my dear brother. “But we have trusty allies to rely on.”

Lev looked puzzled. “What do you—”

Then he looked up.

Behind us, our allies began to murmur.

“L-Look.”

“H-How are there so many?”

“They’re gorgeous.”

A field of flickering flowers hung in the sky above. There were dozens of them, and they also floated over the rebel army on the opposite bank. Then griffins and wyverns poured through the magic circles. Elves, humans, and dragonfolk held their reins, and more fighters alighted from their backs. The second wave had arrived!

Above us, two women shouted, “Well met!” and “Thanks for waiting!” as they leapt down from their griffins. One was an elf with gorgeous, glistening jade-green hair. The other, a maid with scarlet tresses fluttering behind her. It was Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera and Lily! The pair—who had hit it off in the royal capital—cast levitation spells just before they hit the ground and landed gently.

“O Lily!”

“You got it!”

Their spear and twin greatswords cleaved through several spell-soldiers without mercy. They didn’t even allow the former knights a chance to fight back.

“Fragile things,” remarked Duchess Leticia. “And above all...”

“I feel sorry for them!” Lily chimed in.

They followed up with the advanced spell Imperial Storm Tornado and the supreme spell Firebird. The avian messenger of doom engulfed the spell-soldiers with even more than its usual power, forcing them to pulse brightly with the light of Resurrection.

Lev clicked his tongue in irritation and clenched one fist, launching another barrage of black needles.

“Not so fast!” Tina shouted, suddenly darting forward. Ellie and I were right beside her, crying, “Right!” and “Don’t forget me!” Our triple barrier of ice, wind, and fire completely nullified the attack.

The remaining spell-soldiers had reorganized.

“Who are you?!” Lev screamed from behind their line.

“What haphazard formulae, and so disagreeably constructed,” opined the former duchess. “I daresay the Church of the Holy Spirit has a hand in this. O Lily, burn them all to ashes. They never cease prattling about the reclamation of the holy land and the advent of the Holy Spirit, as if our whole world could be explained in such terms. How much simpler my life would be if it could!”

Duchess Leticia's scathing remarks put a taut rictus on the hooded man's face. The maid, however, chortled and said liltingly, "I'd get in trouble if I did that! I mean—"

"I'd like that pleasure myself, Letty," a new voice said, just as a massive deep-scarlet Firebird dove straight down at Lev. The spell-soldiers swiftly raised their massive shields, deploying fire-resistant barriers and other magical defenses—but to no avail. The supreme spell tore through them like so much paper, reducing one after another to ashes.

"Everyone, stand clear!" Lady Stella shouted in alarm.

"And raise fire-resistant barriers!" Caren added.

"My ladies, please fall back," Anna cheerfully directed us. We immediately obeyed.

"What about me?" asked my dear brother Richard while he cast several dozen fire-resistant barriers.

"You're strong enough to fend for yourself," Lily cheerily replied as she did likewise.

At last, all the spell-soldiers were completely incinerated, and the dreadful flaming bird set its sights on Lev.

"Th-This c-can't be ha—"

Before he could finish his disbelieving cry, the Firebird exploded! Flames beyond any we'd yet seen swallowed the inquisitor, shaking the air over the whole city and melting the ice in the great canal. I looked behind me and saw the royal guard and the beastfolk frantically hunkering down.

Ahead of me, a woman alighted. She wore a scarlet military uniform and cap, and held a sword in her right hand.

"Dear mother!" I cried.

"I see I'm fashionably late," she replied. "You're all safe, I trust?"



My dear mother—Duchess Lisa Leinster—and Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, took up positions ahead of us, their piercing glares locked on the roaring inferno.

"He escaped," my dear mother said. "He must have prepared a teleportation spell for emergencies."

"He's swift in retreat," Duchess Leticia agreed. "I must commend him for that, if nothing else. Well, no matter—for the present."

Farther ahead, I could see the grand knights and their sorcerer companion desperately maintaining their magical defenses against the raging hellfire. Meanwhile, on the opposite bank, our sudden reinforcements were subjecting the enemy ranks to a ferocious onslaught. Their ancient battle standard, fluttering in the breeze, bore a shooting star.

“Dear me,” Anna remarked, hiding her mouth with one hand. “It’s the Shooting Star Brigade. That’s the Battlemaster, Chieftain Egon Io, leading their charge. And the captain of the dwarven heavy infantry with the impressive battle-axe is Chieftain Leyg Vaubel, the ‘Fiend Slayer.’”

The Shooting Star Brigade, heroes of the War of the Dark Lord?!

The legendary fighting force, once hailed as the strongest on the continent, had disbanded after the death of its leader, “Shooting Star” Allen. Yet here it was, mowing down our foes.

An especially large floral magic circle launched a line of massive objects into the fray. The enemy troops, who had been clinging to some semblance of order, broke ranks and panicked as boulders slammed into the remains of the bridge, throwing up clouds of dust. A grizzled, bearded elder giant in full armor followed them through the magic circle, another boulder slung over his left shoulder.

“Dormur Gang, the ‘Mountain Breaker’?” murmured my dear brother Richard. “Have all the old soldiers returned to the front?”

Tina, Ellie, and I clasped hands and jumped for joy, cheering.

“Oh, wow!”

“A-Amazing!”

“There are so many of them!”

My dear mother drew her sword again and unleashed a quick forward slash, dispersing the inferno and revealing the elderly earls. Zani appeared injured.

“Now,” she said icily, “would you care to explain yourselves?”

I felt my skin sizzle as blazing plumes filled the air. She was *furious*.

“O Lisa, leave some for me!” Duchess Leticia interjected, twirling her spear with a fearless grin. “I have a history with these whelps.”



Hayden and Harclay had come through my dear mother's flames unscathed. Their eyes narrowed.

"Duchess Leticia."

"We recall you fondly."

"O Haag, Haig, and is that little Zaur I see there? Surely you've not forgotten my lessons to you and Guido?" the former duchess asked sadly. Wind whirled in sympathy with her mana.

The aged grand knights did not answer. Instead, Hayden said quietly, "Our time has come. Shall we, Haag?"

"Indeed we shall," Harclay replied.

Zani rose, leaning on his staff. "Haag, Hayden, I will stand by you to the bitter end!" he declared, his features set in grim determination. Yet the extent of his injuries was plain to see. He was in no condition to face my dear mother.

Hayden and Harclay shook their heads.

"No."

"Stand back."

"I refuse!" Zani insisted, although he was unsteady on his feet. "That long-ago day in the western capital, I swore to die with Duke Guido and with you! I won't have you count me out now!"

Hayden and Harclay seized their old friend by the scruff of the neck. With a grunt of effort and a display of astonishing brawn, they hurled him into the midst of the Violet Order and Algren guard, who were still struggling to hold the line on the opposite bank. Then, using wind magic for amplification, they bellowed:

"Huguemont! Sandra! Fall back! We shall fulfill our final duty!"

"Henceforth, Slavarin will command the Violet Order! I forbid you to die in vain! Zaur, I appreciate your spirit, but don't question your elders' orders!"

Zani was furiously shaking his head even as the young knights and sorcerers lifted him up. The knights of the Violet Order, who had fought on even as the battle turned against them, sounded the retreat.

Don't tell me these old men plan to—

"Good," Hayden said, his face turning peaceful. "Enough is enough."

"We leave the rest to you," Harclay added. Then, in a voice that carried across the Great Bridge, he roared, **"Loyal officers, knights, and soldiers of the east!"**

Friend and foe alike froze as Hayden took up the cry. **"We have lost this war! Yet the Ducal House of Algren and its vassals are the sword and shield of the east! The kingdom's next battle awaits them!"**

“This is not the battlefield you should die on! Defend a renewed kingdom in a new age! Let all blame for this foolish war fall on our old heads!”

“Do not mistake what you ought to protect! And never—*never*—forget it again!”

“We neither apologize nor beg forgiveness!”

Hayden and Harclay bellowed as they swung their spears, conjuring dozens of tornadoes to block the gap between the ends of the fallen bridge.

“What?!” Tina cried in astonishment.

“A-Amazing...” Ellie murmured.

“H-How can they cast so many advanced spells at once?” I wondered.

So, this is the power of the Algrens’ Wings!

Lady Stella and Caren shot us warning glances. Their message was clear: “Don’t get careless!”

We hurriedly returned our attention to the grand knights, who bowed deeply.

“We apologize for the delay.”

“And feel truly grateful for your patience.”

“Hayden, Harclay,” my dear mother said morosely.

“O whelps, can Guido have forgotten all he learned from me?” Duchess Leticia asked, with a grim stare. A sudden, wild gust shook not only the fortifications but the boughs of the Great Tree itself. Her mana beggared belief.

The grand knights raised their heads and responded:

“We bear full responsibility for this disaster.”

“We were dissatisfied with the royal family’s policies.”

“You lie,” my dear mother pronounced.

“Do you expect us to believe such twaddle after all that’s passed?” demanded Duchess Leticia.

We tensed, as did the royal guard and the militia. Then the old knights broke into grins.

“I remember it as though it were yesterday, Duchess Letty,” Hayden said, gazing nostalgically into the distance. “We were all so young when the former duke and our fathers took us, along with Duke Guido, to learn what it means to be a knight and to hear the tale of Shooting Star’s last stand from your lips.”

“If not for those days and your teachings,” Harclay continued in the same vein, “we would have left our corpses on some battlefield long ago. Duke Guido always said as much.”

“Their eyes are so clear,” Tina muttered to herself. “But they look sad.”

Hayden and Harclay looked skyward and shut their eyes.

“How truly foolish we have been, sweeping the young ones into this absurd war, to die for nothing and even...to slay the beastfolk they should have defended.”

“We have fallen from knighthood and deserve to be judged as criminals. Yet, though Duke Guido was poisoned and imprisoned in his sickbed, his concern was always for the kingdom’s future! ‘My life is of no consequence,’ he reproved us when we tried to save him. ‘This insurrection can no longer be stopped—the sickness runs too deep. I was too slow to seek aid. But even if the Algren name is dragged through the mud and our line should fail, we must defend our king, our country, and its people from the wicked clutches of the church.’”

A stunned silence greeted this revelation.

I...I can't believe it! Old Duke Guido Algren ordered his grand knights and Zani to join in the rebellion?

“You mean he used the Ducal House of Algren itself as bait for the nobles and other forces in league with the Church of the Holy Spirit?” asked Lady Stella. “And he enlisted his Wings to lend the rebellion military credibility?”

The sacrifice involved took our breath away.

“Ashamed as I am to admit it,” Hayden replied sorrowfully, struggling to get the words out, “we failed to pass your teachings down to the next generation.”

“We can offer no excuses to the fallen or to the beastfolk,” Harclay continued in the same forlorn tone. “Yet even so!”

“We...We want you to know this, at least!”

“This is our own decision. Duke Guido strictly forbade us to speak of it.”

The grand knights wept as they made their heartfelt appeal to my dear mother and Duchess Leticia.

“Our one and only lord, His Highness, Duke Guido Algren, is a loyal vassal to both kingdom and crown. He would never—*could* never rebel!”

“We’ve no right to ask this of Your Highnesses, but please, please...*please*, when all this is over, inform Their Highnesses, the three dukes and—though I hesitate to suggest it—His Majesty as well.”

Together, they concluded, “We beg of you, grant us this one thing in exchange for our old heads!”

Silence fell on the Great Bridge.

Could...Could this really be...

At length, my dear mother said, “Very well.”

“I understand,” added Duchess Leticia. “You have my word.”

Hayden and Harclay smiled serenely, as though they had nothing left to accomplish.

“Oh, thank you. Now, at last, the weight has fallen from my shoulders.”

“In gratitude, allow us to show you the pride of Algren knights!”

We all started at the intensity of their fighting spirit.

Duchess Leticia shook her head. “Have you not done enough, whelps? Be not obstinate.”

“We know,” said Hayden.

“We haven’t a prayer of victory,” added Harclay.

“Then why?!” demanded the former duchess.

Both old knights smiled gladly.

“We merely follow orders!”

“And those orders include our defeat!”

The kind war hero hesitated. “Even so...”

My dear mother, Anna, Lady Stella, and Caren were equally reluctant, as were we.

“A knight defends their lord to the bitter end, even laying down their life if circumstances demand it! And a knight acknowledges no lord unworthy of such loyalty!” Hayden recited at the top of his lungs.

“You told us that as children with Duke Guido!” Harclay shouted. “And the lesson is still fresh in our old minds! You need not stay your hand on our account!”

Duchess Leticia blinked her beautiful green eyes and raised her spear. “Well spoken,” she said—and meant it. “Leticia Lebufera is proud that the whelps who once nodded off on her lap have attained true knighthood. Show me how the knights of the east do battle!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Hayden, tell me just one thing,” my dear mother interjected, holding out her sword. Four Firebirds materialized in rapid succession.

“What do you wish to know?” the grand knight responded.

“Where is Allen? I’ve heard he was taken to the Four Heroes Sea.”

My dear brother!

I swallowed, and my heart beat faster.

“I believe that Gregory Algren knows his whereabouts.”

Hayden’s soft response hung in the air for a moment. At last, my dear mother said, “I see. Thank you.”

Gregory Algren is the duke’s third son. I can’t recall his face, but still... I met Tina’s and Ellie’s gazes, and we nodded to each other. *We must capture that man!*

Duchess Leticia gave her spear a twirl, then abruptly stopped. “I knew you would ask after Allen,” she said. “I’ve begun to look forward to meeting him!”

Violent emerald gusts blew, then transformed, reshaping themselves into four of the supreme spell Gale Dragon. The tip of

Duchess Leticia's spear turned a vivid green, and an overwhelming blast of emerald wind gathered round her body.

The grand knights poised themselves to charge and called out their names.

"I am Haig Hayden, vassal of His Highness, Duke Guido Algren!"

"And I, Haag Harclay, also sworn to the service of that selfsame duke!"

In unison, they shouted, "We shall see our duty done!"

"I'm Lisa Leinster," my dear mother responded.

"Leticia Lebufera," said the former duchess.

Then, as one, four voices cried, "Have at you!"

Before our very eyes, the Two Wings of the Algrens drew on all the mana they possessed and launched their final charge against the Bloodstained Lady and the Emerald Gale. All I could do was watch, squeezing Tina's and Ellie's hands tight.

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"Impossible!" I bellowed, madly spurring on my horse. "Absurd! This cannot be happening!"

"Grant Algren has fled!" cried a voice from the communication orb on my saddle.

"After him!" snapped another. "Don't let him get away!"

Not a single nobleman or knight rode beside me; elven infantry assaults and airborne wyvern and griffin strikes had scattered them all. Hayden's and Harclay's last orders had also dealt a serious blow to our morale. Entire units seemed to be surrendering en masse.

"Damn them!" I shouted, quivering with rage. "Damn them! Damn and blast them all!"

How could those pompous old men make such a disgrace of themselves?!

The Central Station clock tower sounded the alarm with constant peals. I was already clear of the beastfolk districts and into a human residential quarter, yet still I rode alone. Not a soul lifted a finger to help me, the great Duke Algren! They were all too busy loading wagons with relief supplies "for the people in the Great Tree."

"This is Duke Grant Algren!" I barked into my communication orb. "We are not yet beaten! All forces assemble at the Algren house! We'll send these insolent invaders packing!"

The response? Silence.

Damn! Damn and blast!

I tightened my grip on Deep Violet, tormenting myself with a string of questions I could not answer.

"Wh-What on earth happened here?" I demanded weakly.

I had ridden hard to the Algren estate, never slowing to rest my steed. My journey had taken me past crumbled walls, and now that I stood before the entrance, I found that the house itself had suffered harm as well. I looked up and saw wyverns in flight—dragonfolk cavalry!

I abandoned my winded horse and dashed inside with Deep Violet and my communication orb. “Is anyone here?! It is I, Grant Algren!”

No response. Had they all turned tail and fled without so much as a fight?!

“Gregory! Where are you?! Show yourself!”

Again, silence. Had even he deserted his post?!

I gritted my teeth and, with a wild roar, drove Deep Violet into a wall. In my foolish father’s hands, one stroke of the enchanted halberd had struck down scores of bandits with a blast of lightning. In mine, it merely left a gash in the decor. Rage clouded my vision.

I...I am Duke Algren! This can't be where I—

Then, a thought struck me. I pulled Deep Violet free and stormed upstairs. The house shook incessantly—likely from wyvern attacks. Time was of the essence. I would slay my brainless father, Guido Algren, by my own hand!

I reached the top floor and strode out into the corridor—where I found a most unexpected person waiting for me. He had a pale-violet forelock and wore sorcerer’s robes rather than his military uniform. His hands gripped a halberd, and a dagger hung at his hip.

“Took you long enough, Grant,” he said, acknowledging me with a piercing glare.

“Gil,” I growled at my youngest brother, who ought to have been confined to a villa. “What are you playing at?! Stand aside!”

“You’re on your way to kill dad, right? Well, tough luck. He’s not here.”

I glowered at him, readying a spell on the point of Deep Violet, and said, “Explain yourself.” Gil was still a student at the Royal University. Without the dagger that housed Radiant Shield, he would be no match for me.

“I asked our old retainers to carry him to safety and sent Konoha to guide them. Not that dad was awake for any of it.”

“Konoha? Preposterous! That woman serves my—”

“She’s not one of yours.”

Gil darted in to strike with his halberd, and I hastily raised Deep Violet to block.

Wh-What speed!

“Gil! You dare defy your elder brother?!” I snapped as we struggled to overpower each other. Though this nitwit shared my blood, his mother had been a mere commoner.

“I’ve never thought of you as my brother, and I’m sure the feeling is mutual!” he retorted, and we both sprang back.

The gold chain of the Church of the Holy Spirit jingled about my neck as I activated the advanced spell I’d prepared—Imperial Lightning Dance! But Gil drew the dagger from his belt and fended off my raging bolts with a shield of light.

“Radiant Shield?! But I ordered Gregory to retrieve it from— Of course! You were in this together!”

“Gregory’s no friend of mine. He was already gone by the time I got here. But if you want this dagger so much, here.” Gil carelessly tossed the blade at my feet, where it landed point-first in the floor. “Use it, Grant Algren. Old Haag probably wanted me to use it to do the mopping up—to finish off you and Greck. But I don’t need it.”

“What?” I said slowly, picking up the dagger in my left hand.

Gil shook his head sadly. “Your Great Folly was obviously doomed to fail from its conception. The Howards, Leinsters, and Lebuferas have spent the past two hundred years sharpening their fangs, dead set on a rematch with the Dark Lord even in these days of magical decline, while the Algrens dozed off in the east. Even if you won the first engagement, you never stood a chance. But dad, Haig, and Haag allowed you to try anyway.” He let those words hang in the air for a moment. Then, “Do you know why, Your Highness, *Lord* Grant Algren? Of course, it seems like the old men underestimated what the other ducal houses could do when it came to war.”

After an extended silence, I growled, “Nonsense!”

“They used you as bait,” Gil continued, raising his halberd above his head. “Bait in a trap to wipe out all the radical nobles with ties to the Church of the Holy Spirit. Dad reckoned that was worth bringing our house to ruin for.”

“H-Have you taken leave of your senses?!”

Bring the Ducal House of Algren to ruin? It was absurd. I knew it was absurd, and yet...

“So, apparently, it falls to me to clean up the mess,” my foolish brother said as mana converged on his weapon. “Tough break, right? Don’t hold back, Grant, because I won’t. I’ve got a bone to pick with you.” He paused, then exploded. “How dare you?! How dare you make me hurt him?! Make me hurt Allen?!”

The whole corridor crackled with electricity, and the windowpanes shattered one after another.

I...I know this spell!

I swung the dagger, endeavoring to call forth the power of Radiant Shield—but nothing materialized.

“D-Defective piece of junk!” I screamed, giving in to anger and thrusting the blade into a wall just as Gil completed his spell.

With a clap of thunder, it took shape: the supreme spell Lightning Lord Tiger, symbol of the Ducal House of Algren.

“H-How?” I demanded, quivering with rage. “How could the likes of you, with your base blood, wield th-that spell?”

“Isn’t this how you’d like to go out? Besides, I’ve got no right to cast Allen’s spells.”

“Gil, wai—”

“Who’d wait for *you*?!”

Lightning Lord Tiger surged toward me, blasting apart walls, floor, and ceiling as it came. I scrambled to fire lightning spears at it, but to no avail—it simply absorbed them. The crackling beast opened its gaping maw. I shrieked.

Then, just before devouring me, the tiger gave a great leap, demolishing the roof as it passed over my head. I fell backward, overcome by terror.

Gil stalked toward me down the corridor, drawing the dagger from the wall.

“E-Enough!” I cried, backing away. “Stop! Stop this!”

I hit a wall. Gil brought his dagger down—and it grazed my ear as it sank into the woodwork.

Before I could recover my wits, he said, “Where is Allen? Where have you taken him?! What are you making him do?!”

“H-He’s in a ruin on an islet in the Four Heroes Sea,” I answered, struggling to find the words. “Th-That’s all I know! A-Ask Gregory if you want more!”

“All right, then— Jump!”

Without warning, Gil hit me with a blast of wind magic. Deep Violet crashed through a window and out of the house. A moment later, I saw a greatsword dripping dark water thrust up from the floor below.

Where have I seen that blade before?

Before I could think of the answer, I was flung out of a window myself. I struck the roof and lost consciousness.

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I leapt backward, casting a wind spell at Grant. The greatsword poking through the floor paused, then bristled with watery thorns. The spines shot through everything in their path as they closed in on me. I swung my dagger, activating Radiant Shield, and sped up my retreat.

The floor collapsed around the massive hole punched in it. Through the billowing dust, something jumped up from the floor below and landed in the corridor. I heard the clank of armor, the whistle of a blade shredding the dust cloud, and then—applause.

“I’m impressed you survived that,” said a new voice. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Gregory,” I said slowly.

There, in the corridor, stood my third-eldest brother, Gregory Algren, dressed in a gray hooded robe and carrying a church staff. Before him was a greatsword-wielding knight in head-to-toe black, his face invisible beneath his helmet. Behind him, an old sorceress, also robed in gray. The man called Lev wasn’t with them.

“I don’t care what you’re scheming in the shadows,” I said, thrusting out my halberd. “Just tell me where Allen is!”

“Allen? Oh, you mean that mock beast,” he responded. “He’s dead.”

“What?” I could hear my own halting voice turn cold. Allen was dead? The same Allen who had saved my worthless hide? I squeezed my halberd and dagger painfully tight as I growled, “Do you realize what you’re saying?”

“Yes, perfectly. Now, since I’m about to make you one of my test subjects anyway, I might as well tell you: that mock beast is a key.”

“A key?” I echoed, even as his words sent a chill down my spine. A “test subject”? Was that what the black knight between us was too?

“Yes, a key—albeit a defective one. Lev branded him with a mark of malediction that would kill him in ten days and tossed him into the Fire Fiend’s tower, but he never returned. That was two weeks ago.”

After a long pause, I said, “Oh.”

“What? That news doesn’t upset you? I thought you were quite attached to that mock beast.”

Silently, I began deploying Lightning Lord Tiger on my halberd.

“My word! A second supreme spell? Wonderful. I always knew you were the best of them, Gil! Nothing like those imbeciles, Grant and Greck! You’ll make an even better test subject than the Black Knight, William Marshal here.”

That’s *what became of the Black Knight after Gerard’s plot?!*

“You’re a vile creature, Gregory,” I spat, shuddering. “By the Algren name, I’ll end you here and now!”

I imbued my feet with wind magic and sprinted forward. A barrage of sinister gray shields appeared in front of the Black Knight—the knockoff of Radiant Shield and Resurrection from Konoha’s reports!

I swung my daggers, conjuring Radiant Shields of my own, and kept charging. Gregory’s eyes widened in surprise as the Lightning Lord Tiger on my halberd activated.

“My lord!” the sorceress cried. Her voice sounded young.

The Black Knight brought his greatsword down—and my halberd’s aura of lightning sliced through it. This was the Violet Axe, my

house's secret art and my secret weapon. Like Lightning Lord Tiger, it had taken me meeting Allen and devoting myself to constant, intensive training to master. I reversed my blade, slashing the Black Knight across the chest with my return stroke, and pressed on toward Gregory.

Just as the sorceress tried to get between us, I felt a sudden burst of animosity from behind me and threw myself out a broken window and into empty air. I glimpsed a wave of dark-red tendrils lancing toward me from the Black Knight's right arm!

"Wh-What the devil?!" I exclaimed, fending them off with my halberd as I fell. A rough blast of wind magic allowed me to land on my feet in the garden.

The Black Knight came crashing out of the house, his right arm no longer remotely human. I sensed strange mana as Gregory and the sorceress appeared in the garden as well.

Teleportation magic?

I could feel the beads of cold sweat standing out on my forehead. I'd drawn on Radiant Shield, cast Lightning Lord Tiger, and even used the Violet Axe. Supreme spells and secret arts both guzzled mana, and mine was running out. But what difference did that make?! Allen had kept fighting until his mana was completely exhausted. I'd lost the right to call myself his classmate, but I'd still studied with him. I couldn't make a disgrace of myself!

"That was quite a feat," said Gregory. "But you must be at your limit now. Stop struggling."

I heard his fingers snap, then I grunted as searing pain shot through me. I fell to my knees, clutching at my chest. It felt like he had my heart in a vise.

The mark of malediction I took from Konoha?

"I know how kind and caring you are," Gregory continued, "so I felt certain that you would transfer my mark to yourself once you learned of its existence. And I was entirely correct. Ito, bind him."

"Yes, my lord." The old sorceress advanced on me.

You're right—this is all according to plan!

I lurched up and lunged at Gregory, keeping low to the ground.

"No! My lord!" cried the sorceress.

"H-How are you immune to my curse?!" Gregory demanded.

"Too slow!" I snapped as my halberd cut his staff in two. I immediately struck again, but the sorceress stopped the blow with a blade of darkness she'd formed on her staff, shouting, "Never!"

The Black Knight's right arm shot out, unleashing another wave of tendrils.

"Damn!" I cursed, racing around the garden to dodge.

"H-How did you lift my curse?!" Gregory wailed. "I wove multiple

forms of encryption into that mark! It was my masterpiece!”

“Yeah, it gave me a hard time!” I panted, holding off the Black Knight and sorceress with rapid-fire lightning shots. My eyes met Gregory’s. “But compared with Allen’s formulae, your mark was a cinch!”

“Kill him, William!” Gregory shrieked, his face flushed with rage. “Gerard’s life depends on it, and so do your men’s!”

Now, what’s my next move?

Just then, the sorceress and I looked up in surprise. Even the Black Knight froze. Something was coming—something terrifying.

“What are you waiting for?!” Gregory yelled. “Now’s your chance! Finish—”

“My lord!” the sorceress screamed as countless flaming blades rained from above.

I hastily activated Radiant Shield, but the barriers of light were dropping like flies. The bombardment had caught Gregory flat-footed, but Ito scooped him up and retreated to safety. The Black Knight, who was the target of the attack, raised his charcoal shields to defend himself, but there were just too many swords. Although he stopped the first wave, they were starting to overwhelm—

Then, to all of our shock, a young woman of dark-crimson flame plummeted straight down onto the knight. She left a trail of ominous light behind her as her two swords mercilessly severed his right arm and leg.

I recognized this “devil.”

The light of Resurrection flickered as the Black Knight’s arm tried to regrow. Then the woman’s eight fiery wings morphed into blades, and a slicing tempest sent him hurtling into the house. The crash sounded too loud to be real.

“Wh-What?” Gregory asked, then his rage returned. “I...I never planned for *this*! Oh, it’s infuriating. Ito, we’ll rendezvous with Lev! I’ve already gained all I can here! Our business is done!”

“Wait! Gregory!” I yelled, but the sorceress ignored me. She brandished a talisman, and the two of them vanished.

A moment later, the Black Knight crawled out of the rubble. He seemed incapable of maintaining his human form—he looked like a four-legged animal with writhing tendrils where his right forepaw should have been. What had been done to him was inexcusable. But at the moment, I was more concerned about...

“Lydia!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “Please! Come to your senses!”

The source of this sinister mana, which was igniting the whole area through mere proximity, was Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. There was no light in her crimson eyes, and her scarlet hair

was frayed and lusterless. A strange mark covered her right arm and cheek, and eight ominous wings of flame spread from her back. What had done this to her? That was obvious—she must have heard what happened to Allen.

What should I do? What can I do?

“Lydia—”

I never got a chance to finish that sentence. The Black Knight loosed a wild barrage of watery charcoal spears from his whole body, all aimed at the Lady of the Sword. Her wings ruthlessly intercepted them, reshaping the landscape with harsh blows and shadowy crimson flame.

“Lydia!” I shouted again. Then I grunted in pain as a shock wave slammed me into the stone wall that circled the estate. The Black Knight was conjuring a second volley—massive dark-gray orbs of water this time—while Lydia spawned a horde of writhing, serpentine briars.

Not good. Unless I do something...

I reached out, struggling to push forward, but my body refused to move. I was always, *always* useless when it mattered most. Tears blurred my vision.

“Allen,” I mumbled, “I’m...sorry.”

Another massive shock wave sent me flying. Helpless, I sailed through the air and plummeted into a nearby canal. The halberd and dagger slipped out of my hands. The water was cold, and I was sinking, my mind growing dim.

Oh. I’m going to die. And I’m still so deep in Allen’s debt—I never got to do anything for him.

I wonder...if Konoha managed to get away.

I heard something above me. Then someone gripped my arm and started hauling me toward the surface.

Who’s there?

Just before I blacked out, I saw a black-haired young woman struggling up through the water with her arm around me.

She’s as dumb as I am. Why didn’t she just ditch me? Still...

With the last of my mana, I cast a wind spell to propel us.

“Lord Gil!” Konoha cried, spluttering as we broke the surface. Even though she was soaking wet, I could tell she was crying.

That figures. Allen would’ve been a lot smoother about this, I thought, trying to smile as I lost consciousness.

Chapter 4

“All masters of botanical magic, help to repair the Great Bridge! It needn’t be fancy!”

“Water specialists, lend a hand fighting fires in the city!”

“Treat *all* the wounded, friend or foe!”

“Giants! Dwarves! Shift this rubble!”

“Don’t let women and children outside the Great Tree yet!”

“Advise any forces still fighting to surrender! Greck Algren is a prisoner, and Grant Algren is a fugitive!”

In the aftermath of the short, fierce battle, the plaza before the Great Tree had devolved into chaos. Apart from the dragonfolk, who were still picking off stragglers; the Flower Sage and her demisprites, who would be the last to teleport in; and the headmaster, just about everyone was present and accounted for. Anko and the professor’s students would remain in the royal capital to seal off what lay beneath the Royal Academy. And the first thing that struck me about this gathering was its lack of racial divisions.

“Richard, I’ve finished reorganizing our knights,” Bertrand reported. “Lords Hayden and Harclay are gravely injured, but they’ll live to— What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, well, it’s not the easiest thing to put into words,” I replied, with a wink. “I was just thinking that I’m glad we fought.”

The seasoned knight beamed. “I couldn’t agree more.”

If the kingdom’s future was anywhere, it was here. That was worth fighting for.

Softly, I said, “Bring me the names of the fallen.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the midst of our solemn moment, Duchess Leticia and my mother arrived from the direction of the Great Tree, where they had just been conversing with Luce. Anna, Romy, and a disgruntled Lily trailed behind them.

“Richard.”

“Mother,” I said. “Are you sure about this? Letting Lynne and the other girls go alone?”

The Howard sisters, Ellie, Caren, and my little sister Lynne Leinster were all absent. They had detected emanations of strange mana and raced off toward the Algren estate.

“Lisa cannot slay her own daughter,” Duchess Leticia declared,

her beautiful jade-green hair fluttering. “This lady is too gentle for her own good—she would truly rather be cut down than take a sword to her child. Yet mayhap that’s as a mother should be. That woman—Ellyn—is the same.”

After emerging victorious from her duel with Hayden and Harclay, my mother had gone straight to see Ellyn, who was tending to the wounded inside the Great Tree. And no sooner had they reunited than she’d tearfully thrown her arms around her friend.

“Forgive me, Ellyn,” she had said. “You left your Allen in my care, and yet...”

“Oh, Lisa, please don’t cry,” Ellyn had soothed her. “That’s the sort of boy he is. He’s Nathan’s and my pride and joy. Still...I wish I could have taken his place.”

I had never seen my mother weep before.

Lily raised her hand, still looking miffed, and whined, “Ma’am! I’m nervous about the little ladies on their own! I should—”

“Certainly not,” Anna blithely interrupted.

“You are a maid, Lily, and you ought to leave this matter to the young gentlewomen,” her second-in-command added, spectacles flashing. “Do you want Maya, who remained behind in the royal capital, or the Howard maids, who allowed us to teleport ahead of them, to laugh at you? Or do you fancy Mr. Allen as well...*Lady Lily?*”

“Oooh! R-Romy, you big meanie!” Lily sulked.

“Mother,” I interjected, “the three dukes and Her Royal Highness cannot leave the royal capital for the time being. What about Allen’s —”

Before I could say “rescue,” a wyvern touched down in front of us. Astride its back was the Battlemaster, Chieftain Egon Io of the dragonfolk. With him were a dark-skinned, black-haired young woman in masculine attire and a young man in sorcerer’s robes, both unconscious. Chieftain Io acknowledged us, then lifted the pair in one hand, dismounted, and gently laid them out beside us.

“This girl bolted out in front of us,” he said. “She cried, ‘This gentleman needs a healer! Gregory has already fled. Mr. Allen is—’ And at that point, her strength gave out.”

“Lily,” my mother directed.

“Sure thing!” Lily replied, then promptly commenced treatment.

I recognized the cool-eyed young man from a ball in the royal capital a few years earlier. His name was...

“Gil Algren,” I murmured.

The crowd shot icy glances. “Algren” had become a dirty word.

Then a black-haired, kimono-clad woman—Momiji—ran over.

“Konoha!” she cried.

“M-Momiji! Wait!” Sui shouted, hot on her heels.

That sparked a memory. So, Momiji's younger sister had saved Gil Algren.

A fresh array of floral magic circles appeared in the sky over the Great Tree. The final wave had arrived. And if Lynne was to be believed, the Hero was with them.

Unsettling bursts of mana shot from the direction of the Algren estate. One was rapidly diminishing, but the other was unmistakably...my sister.

"Allen," I prayed, although I still didn't know whether my friend was alive or dead, "please, keep Lydia—keep my kid sister safe."



"Ellie, Lynne, I can see her now!" Tina shouted from the lead griffin, pointing ahead.

"Oh, it's b-burning..." Ellie mumbled in fright as she flew beside me.

"What in the world?" I murmured at almost the same moment.

I couldn't make out the house itself through the billowing black smoke. Of the two powerful mana-sources I had so recently sensed, only one remained.

"Enemy troops may be lying in wait," Lady Stella warned. "Be careful, everyone!"

"We will!" my two friends and I chorused back.

"Stella, I'll take the lead," Caren said, urging her sea-green griffin to gain speed and dart to the head of the pack.

Then we were above the house, which writhed with thorny serpents of flame. The scene unfolding below took our breath away. The house proper was a heap of burning debris, and the better part of its perimeter walls was in ruins as well. Looking around, I saw a knight clad in black armor and an equally dark helmet crash into the front gate and fall completely still. His right arm was missing.

Suddenly, a fierce wind gusted, scattering goutts of flame. I frantically steered my griffin clear, squinting against the blast. Then I saw her: a young lady in a soot-black uniform, standing atop the rubble with her two swords planted in the ground.

"L-Lydia?" Tina gasped, stunned.

My dear sister showed no interest in us as she reached down with her left hand to a uniformed man lying beside her—Grant Algren. She hoisted him by his throat, and the color began to drain from his face.

Oh no!

Caren leapt off her griffin's back, drawing her black dagger as she plummeted toward my dear sister. "What do you think you're doing?!" she roared like thunder, and a cross-headed lightning spear materialized in her hands.

My dear sister looked up and carelessly tossed Grant to the edge of the roof. Then she drew her swords.

Spear and blade collided! The air trembled, filled with a whirl of blazing plumes and violet sparks.

Lady Stella flashed a hand signal to us. Our griffins dove, and we leapt off onto the ground. Caren grunted as she was driven back, landing beside us.

My dear sister looked at us, and a cold shiver ran down my spine. Her crimson eyes were empty. Her flaming wings refused to settle, constantly moving as though with a life of their own.

Ellie trembled and clung to Lady Stella's left arm. I...I needed to say something. But just as I made to speak in my quavering voice, we all startled and looked up in unison. *She* was here!

"I have no business with a hypocrite who guards a world like this—a world without him in it," my dear sister said. Her voice was nearly a whisper, but I heard her clearly. Her wings flickered into hundreds of dusky crimson blades of flame, poised to intercept the girl soaring toward her at breakneck speed.

"Scarlet crybaby," a clear voice said. "You're just a lost little crybaby now."

A blinding flash of light shattered the host of darkly burning swords, disintegrating them in a single blow. Then a platinum-blond girl alighted on the rubble. She held a pastry, which she popped into her mouth before licking her fingers, striding a few steps ahead of us, and planting her hands on her hips.

An emotion entered my dear sister's eyes for the first time as she said, "Hero Alice Alvern."

"Lost little crybaby," Alice responded. "Did you forget how to walk when you lost sight of your star? Wake up."

"Hypocrite. I'm going to join him. And if you get in my way, I'll cut you down."

"In your dreams. You'll never be a match for me like that."

My dear sister glared, and thousands of thorny serpents burst from her wings of flame.

"Tina, Ellie, Lynne, fall back and raise a barrier!" Lady Stella commanded, drawing her wand and rapier. "Caren! Retreat for now!"

"Right!" the three of us responded.

"Fine," Caren reluctantly added.

We all fell back with Lady Stella and began erecting many-layered magical defenses.

Alice surveyed the fiery, serpentine tide surging toward her and sighed. "Pitiful. Is this the best you can do without him? A spanking is in order!"

Her left hand shot out, and everything around her turned to

astounding, crackling lightning. Then, the great Hero whispered:

“Bolt.”

Another blinding flash annihilated countless thorny serpents in an instant. The barriers we’d built collapsed in rapid succession. Harsh winds filled the air with detritus, obscuring our view.

H-How could any spell be so powerful?

“Ellie, raise a wind,” Lady Stella instructed.

“Y-Yes’m!” Ellie obeyed, her magic making it a little easier to see.

Where is my dear sister?!

“I made that too strong,” Alice said, frowning. “Lost little crybaby, wake— Hm?” She dodged out of the way as flaming blades tore through the dust cloud, raining down from high above.

My dear sister’s eight wings had turned sharp as swords, and the mark of Blazing Qilin had spread all the way to her cheek. Floating there, she was the very picture of...a devil.

Alice backed away, glaring at her. “Four years ago, I told you to hang on to him. You can’t even walk on your own without him, but you kept acting tough, and this is the result.” The Hero pointed her right hand skyward, and I felt another massive surge of mana. “Now I’m mad!”

My dear sister swung her swords lightly, and eight Firebirds took shape.

“No,” gasped Lady Stella.

“They’re hideous,” Caren murmured.

Although my dear sister’s Firebirds narrowly maintained their avian shape, their bodies and wings writhed with serpentine briars of flame, and the fire itself was the dreadful dark crimson of blood. Tina and Ellie were struck speechless, while I couldn’t keep from trembling.

This...This is Lydia Leinster’s Firebird?

Before our very eyes, Alice and my dear sister unleashed their spells on each other.

“Triple Bolt,” the Hero intoned, and three flashes and shock waves struck with even greater force than the first.

“Disappear,” spat the Lady of the Sword at the same moment. The remains of the house toppled, as did the surviving plants in the garden.



What can I do in the face of all this?

As my vision cleared, I murmured, "My dear sister is...gone?"

"She's up on the wall!" Tina cried sharply, the mark on the back of her right hand glowing azure.

My dear sister was indeed atop the wall. Her eight wings flapped, scattering more spined serpents of fire to spread the blaze below. Her eight Firebirds also rematerialized.

Suddenly, Tina stepped forward. Soon, she had passed Alice.

"Comrade?"

"Thank you, Alice," Tina said, standing up straight. "We'll take it from here!"

"What?!" Ellie and I exclaimed in unison, clasping each other's hands.

Us, stop my dear sister in that state? Without my dear brother?

Then the Hero blinked her jewellike eyes—and grinned. "That's my comrade. I'd expect no less from a wolf pup. She's all yours. Good luck!"

With that, Alice bounded to the back of our group.

Th-That's ridiculous! Not even all five of us together can hold a candle to my dear sister! Just blocking those Firebirds is more than we could—Wait.

I exchanged a look with Ellie. When my dear sister was in earnest, her Firebird truly was an all-consuming inferno. And yet...

Alice patted our backs from behind. "Hang in there, Red Tweety. This fight is still up in the air," she said. "Enemy, don't bother trying. Your bosom is already scandalous, and it hasn't even reached its full potential. Deplorable."

"R-Right!" I responded.

"Oh, you're a-awful!" Ellie whined as Alice resumed munching sweets.

Then, backs straight, we marched forward. Lady Stella and Caren seemed to have been quicker on the uptake, because they already stood beside Tina.

"I'm not afraid of you now, Lydia!" Tina shouted, pointing her rod up at my dear sister. "I'll take your spot next to Mr. Allen!"

"If you get in my way, I won't hold back," my dear sister intoned. Her voice was flat, but she was scowling, evidently nettled.

"Yes, yes. Threats from crybaby Lydia..."

"Don't scare us much," Lady Stella cut in.

The next thing I knew, my dear sister was hemmed in by more freezing projectiles than I could count—the Howard sisters' Divine Ice Shots!

Caren dashed forward, entering Lightning Apotheosis as she wove

through the rubble and leapt high into the air.

My dear sister turned her wings into blades to intercept the icy barrage. "You've got some nerve," she muttered tonelessly, fixing Tina and Lady Stella with a wrathful glare.

"I'm sorry!" Ellie shouted as her advanced spell, Imperial Storm Tornado, struck my dear, distracted sister from above. And in the heart of the vortex was Caren, her cross-headed spear at the ready!

"You left yourself wide open!" she roared, punching through one sluggish Firebird after another in her downward strike. And although my dear sister blocked with her left-hand sword, Caren was pushing her back. "Too slow!"

Before my dear sister could bring her other sword to bear, three voices cried, "Not on our watch!" Tina and Lady Stella's ice shots and Ellie's wind chains pelted her, transforming into icy vines that held her fast. My dear sister's face twisted in surprise as my suspicions turned to certainties.

Right now, my dear sister is...much weaker than usual!

Despite her staggeringly potent mana, her construction was sloppy—a far cry from her proper spell formulae, which had been a match for my dear brother's.

"Dear sister! Come to your senses!" I shouted, whipping my single-handed sword to one side and hurling my own Firebird toward her. To her further astonishment, my spell ripped through her intercepting wings.

"Go cool off!" Caren shouted in the same moment, winning her clash and slamming my dear sister down into a nearby heap of debris. Another dust cloud rose.

I hope this is enough to snap her out of it, but I doubt it.

Caren landed beside Lady Stella. All the others were still fully alert and weaving the most powerful spells they could muster.

"Hm. Not bad," Alice opined. "Still..."

We gave a start as the rubble disintegrated into a million finely sliced pieces and my dear sister reemerged. "Why?!" she shouted angrily. "Why do you get in my way?! I just want to be with him! If you try to stop—"

"You idiot!" Caren snapped as she, Lady Stella, and Ellie darted into melee range of my dear sister. Her spear flashed in a series of thrusts too rapid for my eyes to follow.

"If Mr. Allen saw you now..." Lady Stella caught my dear sister's desperate sword stroke on her Azure Shield. Her Azure Sword froze the blade in my dear sister's left hand and knocked it aside.

"He'd be so sad!" Ellie slipped inside my dear sister's guard, her fists and feet armored with wind as she struck, struck, struck!

It took all three of them, yet slowly but surely they were gaining

the upper hand. They were overpowering the Lady of the Sword, whose strength normally defied all reason.

Tina pulled the snow-white ribbon from her hair and tied it to her rod. “Lynne!” she called, raising it above her head.

“Focus on your casting!” I replied.

My dear sister had barely eaten since my dear brother had gone missing. And night after night, muffled weeping had been heard from her chamber. Neither her mind nor her body could take much more of

Lady Stella and Ellie went flying backward with a grunt and a squeal. Caren was still holding her own, but their departure freed my dear sister to bring both swords to bear with renewed vigor. The eight flaming wings on her back became spine-covered serpents, snapping at Caren.

“It will take more than that!” Caren shouted, mowing them down with her lightning spear. But dodging my dear sister’s blades had left a wide gap between them—enough space for my dear sister to kick off the ground and charge at Tina.

“Lynne!” Tina called again.

“Leave it to me!” I launched myself at my dear sister, blocking her two-bladed strike head-on. Her blow was fast—but light.

No! No, no, no! The Lady of the Sword is nowhere near this weak!

There was panic in her eyes. I could see her asking herself, “How can these little girls overpower me?”

How couldn’t we?! The Lady of the Sword has always had her Brain—my dear brother—at her side. But right now, she’s in the grip of deep sadness—and her terror of losing him! No...No...

“No crybaby Lady of the Sword will get the better of me! I—we—learned from my dear brother!” My second Firebird flowed into my weapon. The blade reddened as I performed my house’s secret art, the Scarlet Sword! “Please, return to your senses!”

The enchanted, single-edged sword in my dear sister’s left hand shattered. The impact knocked the cap off my head and sent her flying backward with a look of shock on her face.

“Tina, now!” I yelled over my shoulder.

“Just! Wake! Up! Alreadyyy!” my platinum-haired peer bellowed as two wings of ice unfurled behind her. Icy blossoms swirled as she gathered so much mana that I could see it with my naked eyes. She swung down her rod, and, with a snowy gust, a colossal Blizzard Wolf took shape. The supreme spell let out a howl, then commenced its charge.

My dear sister regained her footing and tried to raise the sword in her right hand, but...

“It’s over.” Caren hurled her spear.

“We’ll stop you!” Lady Stella swung her Azure Sword, and between them, they broke my dear sister’s blade.

“Ms. Lydia!” Ellie bound the flaming wings with chains of wind.

Then, at last, the Blizzard Wolf struck! In that moment, I thought I saw my dear sister smile.

A fierce blizzard raged over the whole building, blotting out our view with endless white. In the meantime, Caren, Lady Stella, and Ellie hastened to my side. We were all still on our guard.

At last, the blizzard subsided, revealing that the remains of the house were now one massive block of ice.

“You overdid it, Tina,” I said, shooting a dirty look behind me at Miss First Place.

“I...I couldn’t help it!” she protested. “And *you* used the Scarlet Sword! Was that in your notebook from Mr. Allen?! He didn’t write anything like that in mine!”

“My dear brother must have decided you weren’t ready for it—unlike me.”

“Don’t pretend you weren’t sobbing for us in the royal capital! ‘Oh, Tinaaaa, Ellieeee!’”

“I...I was *not* sobbing!”

“You were too!”

Miss First Place and I were at loggerheads, practically touching as we stared each other down, when a flustered Ellie intervened.

“L-Lady Tina, Lady Lynne,” she wailed. “Y-You mustn’t fight.”

How I’d missed these conversations. Tina was grinning too.

Then the miniature glacier crumbled, split by a sword stroke. Had we failed, I wondered as we swiftly resumed our battle positions.

Slowly, my dear sister appeared over the peak of the frozen roof. Her wings and mark had vanished, and her left hand clasped her stopped pocket watch. My lost cap drifted back to earth, and she wordlessly snatched it out of the air. She dusted off her skirt, then...

“You dropped this.” In a whisper, she added, “You’ve gotten stronger.”

“What?”

My cap was back on my head. A split second later, I heard the whistle of an otherworldly sword slash. Beautiful, fiery scarlet plumes danced in the air.

“Are you awake now, scarlet crybaby?”

“Ugh! I wish you’d just die,” my dear sister grouched. She had passed by all of us before we could so much as react and struck a blow at Alice. The Hero had never drawn her sword earlier, but it was halfway out of its scabbard now and radiating deep-violet light.

When they separated, my dear sister’s sword disintegrated completely.

“I’m stronger,” Alice retorted, resheathing her blade with a smug little laugh.

My dear sister glared bitterly at her, then rounded on us. “You girls still have a long way to go,” she pronounced haughtily. “And Tiny, you think you’re going to take *my* spot? Not in a million years!”

She was her usual self—my dear sister, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. I couldn’t help clapping my hands over my mouth.

Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness!

“Lady Lynne.” Ellie wrapped me in a gentle embrace, and I hugged her back.

“Y-You’re one to talk!” Miss First Place shouted. “You couldn’t even control yourself a moment ago! I’ll tell Mr. Allen all about—”

Suddenly, Tina and my dear sister whirled to stare intently in the same direction. Azure and scarlet sigils blazed with beautiful light on the backs of their respective right hands.

A moment later, we all felt it too and turned to the northeast.

“I-Is this mana...?”

“I’m certain of it!”

“Mr. Allen.”

“It’s Allen!”

My dear brother’s mana had appeared out of the blue on the outskirts of the eastern capital.

“Allen,” Alice murmured softly. “I’m glad. But...”

The front gate flew high into the air, and the fallen Black Knight rose. He was regrowing his arms and legs.

Why now of all times?!

“Lydia, Tina, go! He’s weeping,” Alice ordered, her voice tense. “The knight has been stuffed with a crude blend of Resurrection, Radiant Shield, and Stone Serpent. He’ll take time to bring down. So —”

“It’s time I showed what I can do,” Lady Stella said, smiling as she crossed her wand and rapier. Pure, pale-azure snowflakes billowed out around her and surrounded the Black Knight.

A purification spell?!

“Get going,” Caren said, with a wave of her hand.

“W-We’ll be right behind you!” Ellie chimed in.

My dear sister and Tina nodded, unfurling eight wings of scarlet and two of azure, respectively.

“Caren, Stella, Ellie, Lynne, I’m counting on you to handle things here! Tiny!”

“I’m with you! We’ll go to Mr. Allen!” Tina was the first to go, floating off the ground and taking flight with the awkwardness of inexperience.

My dear sister made to follow her but paused to hug me tight.

“Sorry, Lynne. And thank you,” she whispered in my ear. I heard a clock ticking.

“Dear sister...”

The heat of her fiery wings brushed my cheek as she took off, caught Tina’s hand in midair, and put on a burst of speed. Tina shouted something I couldn’t make out as they swiftly vanished from sight.

The Black Knight, now fully restored, let out a long howl—almost a dirge, I thought.

We readied our weapons, while Lady Stella put the finishing touches on her spell. “Kindly rest in peace,” she said boldly. “Now, have at you!”

*

“He’s late. What the devil is Lev doing?! Ito! Has he contacted you?!”

“No, Master Gregory,” I replied. “Please, calm yourself.”

He cursed and kicked a stone over the cliff edge in undisguised irritation. Meanwhile, I remained alert, maintaining a ward of concealment while I scanned for mana.

This cliff overlooking the Falls of Parting, on the outskirts of the eastern capital, was our designated meeting place. Our environs were desolate, a rarity in this verdant land. And that dubious, over-proud zealot had yet to arrive.

Intercepted enemy communications revealed that although Lev had gone to the Great Tree, he had withdrawn almost immediately—as well he might, given that he’d had the Bloodstained Lady and the Emerald Gale to contend with. Even the legendary Shooting Star Brigade had joined the battle. He stood no chance against them.

The rebel forces were already being routed. This was Lightday, so...they had only lasted one month.

Despite multiple wards of concealment and a supply of teleportation talismans, I could not rest easy. We needed to make good our escape, and quickly. If worse came to worst, I would render Master Gregory unconscious to ensure that we did.

Oblivious to my concerns, he mussed his hair with one hand and muttered, “My predictions were perfect. I managed to experiment on knights of the Holy Spirit, and I got those animals to spirit ancient texts out of the Great Tree and then out of the kingdom. I even planned for the loss of the royal capital. But the west on the march? How did they cast a strategic teleportation spell in such a short time?!”

Word of the royal capital’s capture had reached us early that morning. Not even Chise Glenbysidhe, the Flower Sage, known as the

mightiest sorceress in the west, with the aid of her fellow demisprites and the finest spellcasters of three ducal armies could possibly have worked such a spell in a single day. It was as if our enemies included multiple masters of magical control.

Space contorted, and I resumed the guise of an old woman mere moments before a group of men in hooded gray robes materialized.

“Lev!” cried Master Gregory.

“I sincerely apologize for my late arrival,” said the lead man, removing his hood and bowing respectfully. He appeared to have lost his staff. His entourage remained silent, faces unreadable beneath their deep cowls.

Surreptitiously, I prepared spells to deal with all contingencies. I was no simpleton. But Master Gregory shook his head—he trusted Lev, if not his church.

“I’ve obtained what I needed,” he said. “And my experiment with the Black Knight was a success. It is possible to imbue a spell-soldier with Resurrection, Radiant Shield, and Stone Serpent! Regrettably, I was unable to retrieve Gil.”

“Gil Algren? The Black Knight was expendable, but not him.” A frown flashed over Lev’s face. The Church of the Holy Spirit had listed the duke’s youngest among the “necessities” it demanded we retrieve.

“We’re too near the eastern capital here,” Master Gregory continued, heedless of Lev’s reaction. “Let us depart. I’ve already contacted the Knights of the Holy Spirit.”

“You have a point. I’ve no word of the mock beast either. He must have failed.”

“So, either starvation or the seal claimed him. I’m sorry to hear it.”

The Brain of the Lady of the Sword was an adopted son of the wolf clan. Held in high esteem by the ducal houses of Leinster and Howard and by aberrations like the professor and the Archmage, he was beginning to make his presence known on the stage of history. Even in the midst of this insurrection, he had fought to the bitter end. Could a man of his caliber have died so easily?

“Lev, once I decipher these latest ancient and forbidden texts, I’ll be the greatest sorcerer alive!” Master Gregory exclaimed, his eyes shining like a child’s as he seized the man’s hand. “Gregory Algren will be famed throughout the continent! May our partnership be long and fruitful!”

Lev made no reply. Something was very wrong. I tried to pull Master Gregory away.

“My lord—Above you!” I shouted, activating the advanced spell I’d woven—Imperial Thunder Lance—five times in quick succession. Each one disintegrated just before striking the assailant, who soon

came into view.

Riding bareback astride a wild griffin was a youth in a tattered robe, armed with a sword and rod. With him sat a small girl in a white coat. How many sorcerers possessed the skill to infiltrate my wards of concealment unnoticed?

“Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword,” I murmured, shuddering at the astonishing silence and finesse of his spellcraft.

In the meantime, he stroked the griffin’s head, then turned to whisper something to the girl.

(“Atra, stay on— Oh, all right. But hide behind the rocks. Understand?”)

That done, he faced forward once more and leapt off his mount. The girl followed suit, and the griffin flew off.

Master Gregory let out a strangled cry.

“You!” Lev bitterly exclaimed.

The pair landed, and the girl scurried for cover behind a boulder. The men drew daggers, but the young sorcerer put his enchanted sword and rod to work. I caught grunts of pain and cries of “My blade!” and “He makes it look easy!” as he mowed them down.

“C-Curse you!” Master Gregory screamed, making to fire lightning arrows at point-blank range. Yet his spell disintegrated as a horizontal swing of the enchanted sword bore down on him.

I abandoned my disguise, conjured a blade of darkness on the tip of my staff, and darted in front of Master Gregory, who stood frozen in shock. I blocked the strike, but although I constantly altered my spell formula to keep our assailant from meddling with it, my shadowy blade was vanishing.

He’s better than I imagined!

“Die!” Lev shrieked, drawing a dagger from his waist and casting the advanced spell Imperial Umbral Fetters.

The youth sprang to the boulder, sweeping his rod to one side. Lev’s chains burst apart, froze, and melted into empty air. The little girl poked her head out from behind the rock, hopping up and down. Her furry white ears and tail proclaimed her beastfolk.

“I take it you’re the architects of this insurrection?” said the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, fixing Master Gregory and Lev with a piercing stare. “In that case, I can hardly let you go. And since I’d rather not take things lying down, I’ll also take this opportunity to repay you for your hospitality on the Four Heroes Sea.”



“H-How dare you?! You’re only a mock beast!” Gregory Algren wailed desperately, clad in the gray robes of the Church of the Holy Spirit.

Lev stared silently at Atra, a dagger clutched in his right hand. I shifted to block his view. The ring's light still pointed squarely at the religious fanatic, meaning that he was indeed the caster I sought.

The problem was the diminutive sorceress standing protectively in front of Gregory. She was not to be underestimated.

At last, Lev said, "Mock beast, you broke the Fire Fiend's seal. That creature behind you is the great elemental Thunder Fox!" He roared with laughter. "What a stroke of fortune! Her Holiness's will be done!"

"Stand aside, Ito!" Gregory shouted, shoving past the sorceress. "Mock beast, what is this about the Thunder Fox?! Did you reach the laboratory said to lie in the depths of the tower?! Where is the research?!"

The sorcerers I'd thought were beaten began to rise one after another, glowing with a ghastly light. They had all been implanted with that crude mockery of Resurrection.

"You couldn't handle it," I replied. "I took no papers from the tower, and the seal closed behind me."

"Wh-What?" Gregory spluttered, staggering in shock. "D-Do you realize what you're saying?"

Lev placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Lev! The Fire Fiend's research must— What?"

"Begone," Lev said—as his dagger skewered Gregory Algren.

Blood spilled from Gregory's mouth. Weakly, he asked, "Wh-Why?"

"Why else?" the fanatic coldly replied, gazing at his bloody dagger. "You are one of my 'offerings' to Her Holiness. How could you fail to retrieve the youngest Algren? Just be grateful that I deign to use your diluted blood, incompetent!"

"Lev..."

"Traitooor!" the sorceress—Ito—screamed, her face a mask of rage, as she fired an Imperial Thunder Lance at Lev. The gray-robed sorcerers responded by hurling spells of their own.

Not good!

I blew Gregory and Ito aside with a wind spell. The sorceress caught the nobleman in midair. As they plummeted toward the falls below, her hat flew off to reveal two small horns on her head.

A demon?!

"Impressive. Not many could have responded so quickly," Lev said, his praise ringing hollow. "You're dangerous—potentially even a threat to our grand ambition."

Reflective spell formulae I'd never seen before were taking shape before the sorcerers. This force of church inquisitors must have been specialists in combating spellcasters.

“Thus, although Her Holiness forbade it, I, her apostle, shall take your life!” Lev chuckled darkly. “Your kingdom’s ducal houses have Wainwright blood. So, my brethren, the hour of your martyrdom has come!”

The dozen or so robed figures let out a deafening cheer. Then they formed into three rows and knelt as if in prayer. Lev leveled his bloodstained dagger at me as a massive spell formula began to appear before him. It was a vivid, poisonous crimson. Cracks ran along the ground, and tree branches swayed wildly.

I tried to intervene, but...

“I can’t use magic?!”

Before my eyes, Lev’s dagger was absorbing the men’s mana, becoming a conduit of power. Lev drew a small glass vial from his robes and gulped down the green liquid it contained. His mana grew explosively.

“Magnificent!” he exclaimed. “So, this is the power of the World Tree! As long as I have this, I can make do with weak blood. Now, suffer the Eightfold Divine Seal, the strategic binding array that captured the great spells—and die!”

Eight baleful, bloodred chains lunged toward me. Behind me, Atra cried out at the top of her little lungs.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “No matter what happens, I’ll protect you!”

A moment later, I brought up the sword in my right hand and took the strategic binding spell head-on. It was one of the most painful things I had ever experienced—like countless blades slicing my arm apart. Without Linaria’s enchanted sword, my resistance would have ended there and then.

The sorcerers continued to pray, fresh blood spurting from every part of their bodies. One after another they expired as their injuries outpaced even the healing power of Resurrection.

After what felt like an eternity, the eight chains of blood crumbled to dust. The sword slipped from my right hand and landed point-first in the ground, its mana spent.

Lev chuckled in scornful delight, utterly unconcerned for his comrades who lay motionless before him. “I didn’t think you could weather that—even if the spell was incomplete and its activation, brief. Now...” Once more, an intricate formula appeared on the point of his dagger. “Shall we try again?”

The crimson binding spell reactivated. I thrust out the rod in my left hand to defend. Then a shudder ran down my spine, and I abruptly leapt back, my whole body racked with agony. I clenched my teeth, biting back a scream as I turned back to face my foe.

The eight sanguine shackles had transformed into spears, poised

to run me through.

“The Fire Fiend crafted this spell,” Lev boasted. “It evolves, so don’t imagine you can withstand it the same way twice.”

That’s the last thing I want to hear!

My right hand was useless, I couldn’t cast spells, and I couldn’t meddle with Lev’s unless I actually touched it. The only thing I *could* use my mana for was physical enhancement. I exhaled.

Conclusion: I would block all eight spears and dismantle them directly.

The first shot forward to impale me, but I saw it coming and struck it with my rod, deflecting it into the second. Then I dodged for dear life, all the while racing to dismantle the spell before its corrosion overtook me.

The landscape around me transformed, the very soil taking on a bloodred hue while the trees withered. The men who had collapsed during the first activation disintegrated into ash, and most of the second rank fell. If I was witnessing a “miracle,” then I was determined to reject all that the Church of the Holy Spirit stood for.

At length, the second activation ceased. The rod slipped from my left hand and stuck in the ground, its shaft lying across the sword blade. My whole body screamed in pain. Blood pooled at my feet. But I’d kept my promise to protect Atra.

I glared at Lev. Only the final row of gray robes were still alive.

“Such a waste. You would have made a magnificent laboratory animal,” he said. “But it’s high time you met your end!”

His dagger—the blood on which had dried—rose a third time.

I couldn’t feel my hands, and my legs were covered in spear scrapes. Evasion was no longer an option. But given how many men had fallen, this would be the final cast.

Atra started running to me in alarm.

“Stay back!” I barked.

There were big tears in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” I said, smiling as I advanced. “It’s going to be all right.”

Lev’s face twisted in anger. “Wretch!” he snarled. “Wail, prostrate yourself, and beg Her Holiness for mercy!”

“Never. I gave a young lady my word that I would keep this girl safe!”

“Then perish!”

The spell activated for a third time. Its crimson formula appeared—and the next thing I knew, I’d been slammed into the ground. Immense pressure weighed down on me from high above—heighted gravity confined to my immediate surroundings. I groaned, my bones creaked, and my wounds widened. The magical infection was

spreading quickly, depriving me of my freedom of movement.

Outside the barrier, the little girl yipped her alarm.

"No, Atra," I said weakly. "Run away now, while there's still time."

She shook her head frantically, tears streaming down her face.

What a cad I must be, making a girl cry.

Ignoring the blood that flowed from my lips, I forced back the by now all-too-familiar corrosion and rose to my feet.

The fear in the fanatic's eyes was unmistakable as he shrieked, "M-Monster! H-How can you bear *three* Eightfold Divine Seals and still stand?!"

"You treat people as disposable," I haltingly retorted. "The only monster here is you."

"St-Still your tongue!"

Lev's magic intensified. The crimson formula, however, shattered as the last of the praying sorcerers turned to ash. They had reached their limit—as had I. I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

Atra ran up and clung to me. She was desperately trying to cast healing spells, but they refused to activate. That much of the barrier, it seemed, was still in effect.

"No," I murmured feebly. "Run."

Lev got over his shock, glared at me with bloodshot eyes, and launched an inky chain.

His target was Atra! I had only a moment to hurl her behind me before the chain caught me and slammed me to the ground, where I lay in too much pain to speak.

Lev approached me, breathing heavily. "This is for wasting my time," he panted, driving his foot into my gut again and again.

I grunted, unable even to defend myself.

"Wail! Scream! Beg for your miserable life!"

Brokenly, I murmured, "Atra, run."

The girl stood still, trembling and shaking her head.

"It appears neither you nor the Thunder Fox can wield magic in the wake of the barrier. In that case..." I groaned as Lev hauled me up by the hair, glaring madly into my eyes, and said, "Watch as I torment and capture it. Once that's done, I'll take my time killing you!"

"As if I'd give you the chance. I told you, I gave my word!"

Lev let out a startled cry as, ignoring my agony, I touched my right hand to his chain and used the last of the ring's mana to dispel it. Then I poured all I had into a point-blank cast of the intermediate spell Divine Fire Spear.

"Impos—"

Lev didn't even have time to finish his exclamation before he flew back, skewered by the flaming javelin.

I stood up, gasping for breath. Then I happened to catch sight of my own wrist—the mark of malediction was still there. Alarm bells rang in my head. I couldn't forget that Lev was as fanatical as his men.

Sure enough, he sprang up and charged toward me, his gut wound closing.

Resurrection!

I could no longer counter the attack. The blade of his dagger gleamed dully...and buried itself in Atra, who had thrown herself in front of me.

Time froze. Words deserted me. My emotions hit the boiling point.

Atra looked back, laid a trembling hand on Silver Bloom, and gave me a fleeting smile. "Atra like Allen. Like lots. Thank," she said. Then, "Live."



As I struggled to reach out to her, Atra's body perished from the world. I caught her violet ribbon, dancing on the air, and a long, drawn-out scream burst from my bloodied lips. The ribbon was becoming stained with my blood.

I promised that kind witch that I'd keep her safe! I gave her my word!

Lev was stunned, his eyes dull and dark-red. "I-Impossible!" he shouted wildly. "A...A great spell, sh-shielding someone of its own accord?! It's nonsense!"

I gritted my teeth, disregarding pain as I slipped the ribbon into my pocket and clenched my fists.

Lev paused in his raving to turn his bloodshot eyes on me. "What do you think you're doing, wretch?"

"You have to ask?" I replied, darting toward him and slamming the heel of my left palm into his jaw. Another step forward and I drove my right fist straight into his gut. Lev's knees buckled, his dagger dropped to the ground, and two small glass vials—both empty—tumbled from his robe. I glimpsed an eerie light coming from the church insignia around his neck.

"I'm going to beat you!" I shouted, smashing a roundhouse kick into his head as it jerked down. I felt the sickening crunch of breaking bones.

The fanatic went flying and crumpled to the ground without so much as a cry. My whole body was screaming at me, but I kept ignoring it and picked up his dagger.

"Get up," I said. "A few hard knocks won't keep you down—not with Resurrection at work inside you."

Lev rose, snarling, "To the very end..." His shattered skull had already healed, as had the gaping hole in his stomach. No trace of his wounds remained. "You insist on making yourself a nuisance! I may have failed to retrieve the great spell, but I'll at least claim you as an experimental—"

"Her name is Atra," I interrupted. "Never forget it!"

Closing the distance between us once more, I mercilessly stabbed Lev with his own dagger and silently cast a spell.

"W-Worthless wretch," Lev groaned as the light left his eyes. "How can you...still move?"

With the last of my strength, I pulled the dagger free and kicked him away.

"How can I still move?" I pressed a hand to my agonized heart. *A person can make do with magic—if they're willing to shave years off their life.*

I fell to my knees. My left hand lost its grip strength, and the dagger landed in the dirt. My vision blurred. My body swayed.

Then, mocking laughter. “Oh, I see how it is. You drew on your own life force—not that it did you any good.” Lev stood and conjured a black spine in his hand.

I know this mana. It belongs to the Stinging Sea.

The fanatic began to pace toward me, a gloating smile on his lips. Then he retched violently, spewing crimson vomit.

“I’m bleeding?” he stammered. “I, an apostle? My Resurrection is closer to the original! I have the power of the Stinging Sea and the World Tree! Wretch! Wh-What have you done to—”

Lev screamed as innumerable, uncontrollable spines burst forth from within his own body. The fanatic stumbled aimlessly until his foot slipped on the cliff edge, and with a last, bloodcurdling shriek, he plummeted toward the waterfall.

When I’d stabbed him, I had also made a few revisions to his spell formulae. Resurrection wouldn’t protect him against a rampage from within.

“You suffer for once, zealot,” I spat. Then I closed my eyes. My body was toppling, and my mind was growing dark.

Mom, dad, forgive me. I’m sorry, Caren. Linaria, I’m a failure. I broke my word to you.

Girls, I wish I could have seen you grow.

Sorry, Lydia.

The back of my head was warm. Someone was running their fingers gently through my hair. Droplets struck my face.

Tears?

I slowly opened my eyes and somehow managed to smile up at a scarlet-haired girl in a tattered black uniform. She was resting my head on her lap and leaning over me as she showered me in healing spells.

“Hi, Lydia,” I said weakly. “I see you’ve gone back to your old hairstyle.”

“Unbelievable. Just completely unbelievable!” Lydia snapped. “You’re such a fool, Allen.” She clasped my right hand in both of hers and pressed it to her chest. Her grip was intensely tender, and she looked straight at me, tears welling in her eyes. “I got by...just fine without you, understand?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I knew you’d be all right. I never doubted it for a second.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Even without you...without you, I...”

That was as far as she got before her head drooped and she started sobbing. I didn’t think I’d made her cry like this since our battle with the black dragon.

I was busy stroking Lydia's head with my left hand when I sensed someone else's mana approaching. It was Tina.

The healing light ceased, so I sat up and said, "Lydia—"

"If you apologize, I'll be furious. I mean it," Her Highness interrupted as she looked up, red-eyed.

I reached out and straightened her singed scarlet hair. "Thank you. I'm so glad you came for me."

"Dummy. The nerve of you." Lydia held my right hand to her harder than ever.

I wanted to say something to her, as ordinary as I could manage. But before I even opened my mouth, a colossal pillar of water shot skyward, distracting us both.

A titanic serpentine head rose from the waterfall basin. Gray spell formulae writhed across the creature's entire body, channeling ominous mana. On its face emerged more eyes than I cared to count. The thing opened its jaws and screamed:

"OH, THE AGONYYY! WHY, YOUR HOLINESS?! WHYYYY?! WHY DID YOU ADD STONE SERPENT TO MY MARK?!"

Lev?!

"Pipe down. You're ruining the moment!" Lydia snapped, ruthlessly hurling an eight-winged Firebird at the serpentine colossus.

Another shout followed, and a Blizzard Wolf charged down out of the heavens! Both spells found their mark in a burst of hellfire and ice storm. Then a platinum-haired young noblewoman dove down to us, a pair of icy wings unfurled on her back.

Lydia clicked her tongue and grumbled, "I thought I left her in the dust."

I cast a levitation spell on Tina to slow her descent and guide her down gently.

"Sir!" she cried, springing to hug me the moment her feet touched the ground.

"Not so fast," Lydia cut in, seizing her by the scruff of the neck. "It's my turn now—and forever."

"Excuse me?!" Tina protested hotly, her forelock standing to attention. "It's supposed to always be *my* turn from now on!"

"I can't agree to that."

"Well I can!"

"Both of you," I interjected, "I don't think you appreciate the gravity of—"

A stab of pain in my wrists drew my attention to the mark of malediction, which was giving off an uncanny glow.

Don't tell me...

A barrage of inky spines, each taller than a man, tore through the storm of fire and ice! Lydia drew the enchanted sword and rod from

the ground and began swatting them aside.

"Tiny!" she barked.

"I know!" Tina shouted, scooping me up in her arms and going airborne. Lydia soon caught up to us.

"S-Sir, wh-what...what is that thing?" asked the platinum-haired noblewoman, trembling and clinging tightly to my right arm.

From a hill-sized trunk resembling the body of a titanic turtle stretched eight serpentine heads. A forest of spines and withered trees surmounted the creature's back.

Lydia handed me Silver Bloom. "She's calling to me," she said, displaying the flashing mark on the back of her right hand. "And that thing looks like..."

"Yes," I murmured. "I believe you're right."

Once, in the Holy South Sea off the Duchy of Leinster, we had slain a millennium-old monster: the sinuous Stinging Sea. And now, drawing on the great spell Resurrection, the Royal Academy's Great Tree, and the great elemental Stone Serpent, Lev had dragged it kicking and screaming back to the land of the living. Although his words suggested that this hadn't been part of his plan.

"Sir! Here it comes!" Tina shouted.

The spiny monster ignored us. "THE WORLD TREE SHALL BE MINE!" it roared as innumerable eyes opened on its eight heads. "HER HOLINESS THE SAINT WILLS IT SO!"

Birds and magical beasts were fleeing the nearby forest en masse. The monster began advancing not on us but toward the eastern capital. By "World Tree," did it mean the *Great Tree*?

It already has so much mana at its disposal. If it consumes the Great Tree, the whole city is doomed! Unless I stop it soon—

I felt firm grips on both my arms. Lydia and Tina appealed silently to me with teary eyes.

That reminded me of the officious witch's warning—her advice on how to avoid sharing her fate. Silver Bloom flickered as if to cheer me on as I closed my eyes and implored the two noblewomen.

"Lydia, please use that sword," I said. "Its name is Cresset Fox, and although it's out of mana at the moment, it's one of the finest enchanted blades ever forged. I can't make the most of it—and you'll need a good weapon to stop that monster."

"W-Well now. I-It sounds like you've picked up a bit of sense!"

"Would you help us, Tina?" I asked. "We've no time to lose! Oh, and may I have a communication orb?"

"Yes! Yes, sir! Here!"

Both their eyes lit up, and we sped off toward the city. I accepted the orb from Tina and tightened my grip on Silver Bloom. Then I closed my eyes and prayed.

Atra, lend me strength.

That done, I started speaking into the orb.



“All people in the eastern capital, this is Allen of the wolf clan. By now, some of you should be able to see a terrible creature. That’s the resurrected monster Stinging Sea, and it’s bound for the Great Tree.”

I was in the Great Tree library, getting ready to leave—since I’d heard the war was over—when a man’s voice sounded from the communication orb that Mrs. Mizuho of the fox clan had given me in case of emergencies. Chiho and Ine, the two fox-clan girls I’d spent the past month with, threw their arms around me, shouting for joy.

“Hear that, Lotta?!”

“It’s the nice man!”

“Let’s go outside,” I said.

“Yeah!” they both agreed.

I led the younger girls by the hand. While we walked, the voice continued:

“I repeat, it is bound for the Great Tree. If the monster consumes the tree, it may level the entire city. Evacuate elders, women, and children posthaste. Send them to the underground waterways if you can’t get them clear of the city in time.”

When we got out of the Great Tree, I saw that everyone else had their ears to their orbs too. Toneri, the son of Chieftain Ogi of the wolf clan, was off cowering on his own. Kaya of the squirrel clan and Koko of the leopard clan were holding hands.

“I intend to stop the creature. At present, I am racing to the Great Tree with Their Highnesses, Lady Lydia Leinster and Lady Tina Howard.”

“That numbskull!” Toma of the bearlet clan yelled on the level below us. “He’s biting off more than he can chew a—”

“Shush, Toma,” said Shima of the hare clan and Shizuku of the goat clan, covering his mouth.

Still, I knew how he felt. The other militia looked frustrated too, and so did the royal guard.

If only I were older! I thought, squeezing Chiho’s and Ine’s hands. The next message blared from my orb.

“But as things stand, we won’t make it in time.”

We all looked up at once. My heart was pounding.

“So please, please...*please* lend me your help! Help me to save our city, our homes, and above all, our family!”

The communication orbs stopped blinking, and silence fell. Then Mr. Dag—the former deputy chieftain of the otter clan, who had ferried us from New Town to the Great Tree—slammed his pipe down

on a table and glared around. His eyes were all red.

"I hope you scalawags all know what this means," he said, weeping. "He already saved our hides once. And now the dolt—the damned *buffoon*—is trying to keep us and the whole city safe. That tyke we hurt for our own selfish reasons and refused to call beastfolk is fighting for us! And why? Because, hopeless as we are, he honestly believes that we're...we're his family! Beastfolk never turn their backs on family—especially not our young! That's...That's the last scrap of pride we've got left!" He dried his eyes on his sleeve and boomed, "It's time to put *our* lives on the line! Who's with me?!"

The grown-ups exploded in cheers, pumping their fists in the air.

Ogi of the wolf clan, who was head of the council, started giving orders too. "Unless you can cast botanical magic or steer a boat, get inside the Great Tree. No matter what, we *will* raise the strategic barrier! Elders, women, children, the gravely wounded, and prisoners of war, follow the young militia members into the underground waterways! Send urgent messages to the city's human residents! Rolo, take command on the front line!"

"At once!" chorused the other chieftains.

"Understood." The militia captain, Mr. Rolo of the leopard clan, nodded.

And just like that, all the beastfolk went to work.

An unbelievably pretty elven lady with shiny green hair—Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera—walked out in front of the westerners who'd grouped up under her banner. I saw elves, dwarves, dragonfolk, giants, and demisprites. On the old battle standard was a picture of a shooting star.

"I trust you were all listening?" she asked quietly.

Everyone nodded.

Duchess Leticia stared into the distance, facing west. "At Blood River, on that day we shall never forget, our commander Shooting Star spoke thus: 'Retreat, and live out your own lives.'"

I heard sobs. The old dwarven, giant, and dragonfolk men in the front row were crying their eyes out.

Duchess Leticia turned back to face them. "I knew such would be Allen's command. He was the kindest...the kindest man who ever lived. And as his lieutenant, I could understand the order. And yet, even so..." The legendary elf—whom I knew from fairy tales—shook and looked up at the sky. "That day, I...I truly wished to hear him say, 'Join me, and die at my side.'"

The sobs got louder.

She wanted him to ask her to die with him? She must really have loved him a lot.

"Yet...Yet!" Duchess Leticia dried her eyes and gave just the

prettiest smile. "Now, that boy—the new Shooting Star—begs for our aid! 'Lend me your strength,' he says. 'Fight at my side.' O my old comrades in arms, what say you?"

The westerners were all smiles, even through their tears. They drew their weapons and roared:

"To battle! We stand with Shooting Star!"

Duchess Leticia nodded, satisfied. She held up her spear and shouted, "Then battle we shall have! We stand with Shooting Star! And what of you, O Lisa?" she asked the other great lady, who had been standing off to one side and listening to her speech.

Duchess Lisa winked and answered, "What a silly question. I owe that boy and Ellyn more than I can ever repay. Don't forget, he saved my daughter's life *and* heart, and what greater obligation could there be? I'll join you. Anna."

"The maid corps is ready for action," chimed in the duchess's waiting maid, Ms. Anna, clapping her hands together.

Lily—the nice lady with the huge chest who'd been giving us sweets just a moment ago—looked like she was raring to go too. Her fists were clenched, and part of her bangs was sticking up and waving. "I guess I can't turn down a request from Allen," she said. "A maid's got to listen to her master!"

"Master"? Celenissa."

"Yes, Ms. Romy, ma'am. I have it recorded."

"Lily, I'd like a word with you later."

"Y'know, I've never actually met the guy."

Being a maid seemed like a lot of fun. I didn't want to admit it, but I might have found my dream job.

Duchess Leticia and Duchess Lisa set off. Then a white sea-green griffin came down from the sky with a baby griffin on its back. Right away, there was a lot more shouting.

"Chieftain Io! Chieftain Vaubel! Chieftain Gang!" Mr. Rolo called to the western leaders. "Take my men as guides!"

"You have my gratitude," said the dragonfolk.

"Thanks for offering, but we don't exactly move at the same pace," said the dwarf.

"I'd prefer to dig in on high ground," said the giant.

"Put your dwarves on boats!" Mr. Dag cut in. "You lay traps, right? I heard bedtime stories about it when I was a little one!"

"Ha! This otter's got a good head on his shoulders!" boomed the dwarf. "I'll take you up on that!"

While they talked, they all headed toward the Great Bridge and the big canal below the tree. That left Lord Richard Leinster, who had his hand on his forehead.

"He already escaped on his own and saved Lydia, and now the

whole city is next on his list?" he groaned. "This is why I never—"

"Richard," called a knight with a beard.

His Highness smoothed back his hair and said matter-of-factly, "The knights of the royal guard are the sword and shield of the kingdom, sworn to aid the weak. But you know"—he grinned at his knights—"Richard Leinster considers himself a friend to Allen of the wolf clan. And when I was a boy, I was taught that anyone who turns his back on a friend is scum. Most importantly, I still haven't gotten a chance to give Allen that punch I owe him."

They're going to punch him?

Chiho, Ine, and I looked at each other.

But then the knights laughed, and His Highness stood up straight and shouted, "Knights of the royal guard, march! We're going to support Allen, our brother-in-arms!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Wait! Please wait!" an old man called. He was an enemy, all tied up, and there were other prisoners watching from behind him. They seemed important.

"Zani?" said His Highness. He sounded confused.

"Lord Richard, forgive our shameless request. We wish to join the battle!"

"I don't—"

"We lost our way! Our conduct has been inexcusable. However..." The old man pressed his face to the ground and cried, "The eastern capital is Duke Guido's home! Haag, Hayden, myself, and all of us here belong to this city! We, too, have looked up at the Great Tree all the days of our lives! Please, I implore you!"

"We beg of you!" shouted the raggedy knights and sorcerers behind the old man. They all pressed their heads to the ground too.

"Untie the prisoners," His Highness commanded sternly. "And be quick about it! We're running out of time!"

"Oh, thank you," sobbed the old man as the royal guard untied one prisoner after another and helped them up.

My chest felt really, really hot all of a sudden. Everyone was coming together to save the city—to save Allen. Chiho and Ine were crying too.

Everyone had gone except for a few dozen demisprites, an elven sorcerer holding a staff—the Archmage—and the white griffin. And the baby griffin, which a demisprite girl was holding.

"What shall we do, Chieftain Chise?" she asked a demisprite lady, who was petting the full-grown griffin.

The lady didn't answer the question, but she murmured, "That otter made a good point. I've thought long and hard about it. He saved us and died, while we lived on. Sometimes I'm almost mad with

jealousy that Crescent Moon got to die with him. And I bet that elf there feels the same way.”

The girl kept quiet.

“I won’t deny it,” said the Archmage.

The Flower Sage lowered the brim of her floral cap and rose from her chair. Ever so quietly, she confided, “But at long, long last, I understand.” Chieftain Chise’s tears left stains on the ground. The white griffin raised its head. “I survived Blood River so I could be here today! Only for that! For this moment when I can put my life—my whole life since he left us—to good use! Ando, Rodde, Luce, give me your help. This is too big a job for those beastfolk youngsters to manage alone. We’re going to raise the Great Tree’s strategic barrier in record time!”



The rampaging Black Knight wailed as, amid a flurry of pale-azure snowflakes, he began turning to ash before our eyes. Lady Stella held her wand and rapier crossed as she completed her spell.

“William Marshal, you have fought long enough,” she quietly declared. “Rest in peace.”

“Isn’t Lady Stella amazing?” I whispered to Ellie, who stood beside me. “I had no idea she’d mastered purification.”

“Yes’m!” Ellie enthusiastically whispered back. “But your Scarlet Sword was incredible too, Lady Lynne!”

Diffidently, I murmured, “Thank you.”

“Mm-hmm. Saint Wolf has grown. If only she didn’t have that accursed bosom. Shame,” Alice chimed in, nodding while, with a little “Hup,” she shifted a massive hunk of rubble one-handed. It revealed an enchanted black halberd embedded in the earth. She pulled the weapon free and called, “Violet Growly.”

“I suppose it’s too late to change that nickname,” Caren answered heavily, looking up from securing Grant Algren. “What do you need me for?”

The Hero hurled the halberd at her. The student council vice president caught the weapon in her left hand without turning a hair.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Deep Violet. Use it. It’s a good weapon for a lightning wolf, although not as good as that thunder-dragon dagger.”

“B-But that’s the hereditary weapon of the Algren dukes!” I gasped and exchanged a look with Ellie.

And what does she mean by “thunder dragon”?

Caren tightened her grip on the enchanted halberd, and it turned violet. She gave it a swing toward the outer wall. The resulting blade of lightning sliced the thick stone like a hot knife through butter.

While Ellie and I oohed and aahed over the display, the last traces of the Black Knight's eerie mana vanished. His helm crumbled to reveal the one-eyed face of a man still in his prime.

"Forgive me the trouble I've caused you," he murmured brokenly, crying bitter tears. "Oh, how I have blundered. One last request: save the lives of my lord, Gerard Wainwright, and my men, true Saint."

With that, the Black Knight turned entirely to ash and was no more. Lady Stella sheathed her weapons and exhaled.

"You did it, Stella," Caren said, swiftly approaching her. "That was one of Allen's spells, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Lady Stella answered proudly. "I've almost finished my second notebook!"

"You don't say."

While the student council president was clearly delighted, her second-in-command seemed just a little put out. I was about to express my own opinion when, to our surprise and Alice's annoyance, a massive tremor shook the entire city. Abnormally potent mana followed, and it was moving toward...the Great Tree?!

Alice leapt atop the outer wall.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked nervously, while Ellie babbled.

"Hurry!" Caren shouted. "We need to join Allen!"

"Everyone, be calm," Lady Stella commanded with composure. "Duchess Lisa is at the Great Tree. We ought to start by alerting her."

Just then, our communication orbs blared:

"All people in the eastern capital, this is Allen of the wolf clan."

It was the voice we'd spent the past month longing for—the voice of my dear brother!

When his message ended, we were trembling. With fear? No, not at all. This...This was *joy*! Joy that my dear brother was safe and sound and, above all, that he'd asked for our help! I couldn't contain my elation, and even Lady Stella murmured, "Mr. Allen..." with flushed cheeks.

Our communication orbs were flashing nonstop. It seemed that all friendly forces would move to intercept the monster. As much as I longed to speak to my dear brother, I knew that everyone calling out to him at once could only lead to chaos. At the moment, we were needed on the battlefield!

"Stella! We should join the fight! We need to do *something* for Allen!" Caren shouted, raising Deep Violet aloft and summoning our airborne griffins. One glance at her face revealed how ecstatic she was.

The tremors steadily intensified, and the train station bell began sounding a ceaseless alarm. Alice hopped back from the wall to the

ground and said flatly, "I know what we're up against: the monster Stinging Sea, dragged kicking and screaming back to life. It's got Resurrection, a bit of the great elemental Stone Serpent, and even power from the World Tree mixed up inside it. Even I'd have a hard time slaying it—my power doesn't work as well on elementals or the World Tree."

Ellie and I looked at each other. Then we smiled.

"That won't be a problem. After all..."

"We've got Mr. Allen on our side!"

Caren stroked the neck of her sea-green griffin as she took out my dear brother's pocket watch and declared, "I'll never lose while Allen's with me. Not even to Lydia—or to you, Stella."

"I wouldn't be so certain," Lady Stella replied, with an intrepid grin. "He gave me a griffin feather *and* two whole notebooks."

All three of us grunted in pain.

Alice attempted—unsuccessfully—to whistle and said, "Nice going, Saint Wolf."

Lady Stella has become a formidable foe. And I must rise to the challenge!

With a dignified shake of her lovely platinum hair, the future Duchess Howard commanded, "Ride! To Mr. Allen's aid!"



By the time we leapt astride our griffins and looked down at the city, tongues of flame were already rising from many places. Amid the black smoke, I beheld a hulking silhouette. Although serpentine, it put me in mind of an eight-headed tortoise.

Salvo upon salvo of offensive magic launched from behind the cover of buildings and struck the creature, raising clouds that obscured my view. It appeared that some forces were already engaging the monster.

"Lynne, I trust you know how things stand," my dear mother called over my communication orb. "An advance force from the eastern houses is already in combat with the creature."

The eastern houses are fighting for us?

"Ah!" I cried as Alice plucked the orb from my hair. "Wh-What did you—"

"I don't think even I, the witch lady, or the Lady of Wind could fully slay that thing," she quietly announced. "Let Allen deal the finishing blow."

I heard a gasp from the orb, then my dear mother responded, "I hear and obey, Grand Duchess Alvern. But even if we can't slay it, we can wear it down."

"Mm-hmm. I'll get ready too." Alice tossed my orb back to me.

I suppose she really is the Hero, even if she doesn't always act like it.

Without warning, a new voice boomed from my orb, bursting with martial vigor. "All airborne forces and those attacking the creature! This is Dormur Gang of the giants! Look well! You are about to witness the hereditary arts of my people!"

Dozens of colossal boulders punched through the dense cloud cover, hurtling down toward the Stinging Sea, which was still advancing, crushing buildings in its path. The western giants, it seemed, had arrayed themselves on a hilltop in the beastfolk district of New Town. I could hardly believe my eyes—their assault on the royal capital had been nothing compared to this.

The Stinging Sea screamed as the stones pelted it, halting its advance—and incidentally demolishing the nearby buildings. Yet the hail of boulders never ceased. So many struck the monster that I could hardly see it through the dust.

"Watch out, everyone!" Lady Stella shouted.

"H-Here it comes!" Ellie echoed her warning.

"Fall back!" Caren barked as a barrage of enormous spines burst through the dust cloud and shot skyward. The projectiles struck the incoming boulders, shattering them before they could reach the Stinging Sea's body, and the creature resumed its advance. Even stalling it would be unimaginably difficult.

Caren drew several small metal plates from an inner pocket and tossed one each to Lady Stella, Ellie, and me. I caught mine and saw that its surface bore an intricate sigil.

"Caren?" I asked, at almost the same moment Lady Stella did the same. Ellie's "Wh-What's this?" sounded equally nonplussed.

"My dad invented them," Caren explained. "They can protect you from a fatal wound. Our spells won't have much effect on that monster, so we'll have to go in close and lop off its heads. I don't need —"

"Caren, I won't accept this," Lady Stella interrupted. "Ellie, Lynne, you keep them."

"I'm no match for you, Madame President," Caren relented, touching her floral beret.

"I could say the same to you."

Then a man's voice blared from our communication orbs.

"This is Leyg Vaubel of the dwarves! I have a plan."

Wyvern riders circled the Stinging Sea, darting in for hit-and-run attacks. At the monster's feet, the militia, royal guard, and Shooting Star Brigade kept up a steady stream of offensive spells from the cover of buildings, fighting to slow its advance. The creature, meanwhile, filled the air around it with enormous, razor-sharp spines, which tore

through any building or person who had the misfortune to get in their way and sent wyverns and griffins plummeting out of the sky.

Fighting back our desire to join the fray, we focused on weaving spells in the air above and imbuing them with mana. Fortunately, we were able to hear much of what passed on the ground, courtesy of Ellie's wind magic.

Chieftain Leyg Vaubel's proposal had been simple and to the point: "That monster's after the World Tree, right? So, all we've got to do is pick a spot on the way there to snare and hammer it."

The Stinging Sea was in hailing distance of the vast plaza before the Great Tree when it suddenly halted its advance. On closer inspection, I saw that its massive legs had sunken into the earth and stuck fast. It was caught in a dwarven trap!

"Now! Hit it with everything you have!" my dear mother commanded from her griffin, which flew beside mine. Spells converged on the monster from all sides.

"ENOUGH OF YOUR PETTY TRICKS!" roared the Stinging Sea. But although it returned fire with countless spines and thrashed its tail, the attacks kept coming.

A dark shadow crossed the sky, and colossal masses of stone crashed down directly onto the creature's eight heads. It was the giant chieftain, Dormur Gang! Despite being riddled with spines, he held his ground and seized the nearest head to him, bellowing, "Leyg! Egon!"

"On it!"

"I'm here!"

The dwarven and dragonfolk chieftains hefted their massive axe and greatsword and dashed over a shattered boulder to strike at the monster. The head in the giant's grasp let out an earsplitting screech, which died abruptly when their blades severed it. Seven more remained.

The stump writhed, but a rapid fusillade of spells impeded its attempt to regenerate. It did, however, finally shake off Chieftain Gang, who fell into a canal. A bloodred stain spread over the water's surface. Chieftains Vaubel and Io fell back as well, likewise bloodied from head to toe.

Even so, the three old war heroes let out a roar to boost our army's morale.

"Did you all see that?!"

"The thing can die!"

"If we band together, we can slay it!"

So, these are the people who stood by the legendary Shooting Star!

"I believe we're next in line," Anna cheerily announced from the roof of a nearby building.

"Allow me," Romy added.

“Yes, ma’am,” one of the other maids replied as Jean yelled, “Right there with you!” and joined her two superiors in leaping at the Stinging Sea.

The monster raised its heads and sprayed needles from its mouths. Yet Anna merely said, “Romy, Jean, as you are,” and waved her hands. Invisible strings shredded every last one of the erratic projectiles, clearing a path for the maids.

The second-in-command gripped her long-shafted war hammer in both hands and, with a sharp cry, brought it crashing down onto the crown of one monstrous head! The head slumped, and Jean yelled, “Gotcha!” as, amid the ongoing magical bombardment, she slashed with all her might and—

Clang!

The neighboring head blocked her strike with its jaws. She was in danger!

“You’re too careless,” Celenissa remarked, cleaving the monster’s fangs and rescuing Jean with a stroke of her scythe. Farther back, Nico conjured water lions to fend off further attacks. But the head was still—

Smug, lilting laughter filled the air, followed by a cheerful declaration that “The star always shows up late!” Lily was charging along the rooftops, her scarlet hair streaming out behind her! A spiny barrage assailed her, but she weathered it with Anna’s support and her own fiery flower shields. She let out a piercing yell as her twin greatswords flashed once, twice, and a second severed head fell to the ground!

While the Stinging Sea screeched, two of Lily’s Firebirds took flight. The creature was still trying to regrow its lost head when the ensuing inferno engulfed its open wound. That left six more to go!

“Don’t hold anything in reserve!” my dear brother Richard called to his knights.

“Fire everything you’ve got!” Rolo barked at his militia.

Their troops unleashed a magical cannonade, forcing the monster to focus its attention on the ground.

My dear mother signaled to us and leapt off her griffin without a moment’s hesitation. Duchess Leticia laughed and followed hot on her heels, crying, “Oh, what a thrill! O Lisa, leave me my share of prey!”

I shot a meaningful look at Ellie, Lady Stella, and Caren. (Alice was hovering above the plaza.) Then I let go of my reins, drew my sword, and we all dove toward the Stinging Sea.

Ellie used her wind magic to gain speed. I concentrated my Firebird into my weapon, while Lady Stella did likewise with her Frost-Gleam Hawks—I invoking the Scarlet Sword, and she, the Azure Sword and Shield! Caren, meanwhile, held her cross-headed spear in

her right hand and Deep Violet in her left.

Below us, I saw my dear mother and Duchess Leticia claim a head each, wind and fire incinerating and shredding their targets into oblivion. What a superhuman feat!

“KNOW YOUR PLAAACE!” roared the Stinging Sea as its body swelled...and then unleashed a barrage of spines that dwarfed any of its previous assaults! Buildings and trees became pincushions, and the area around the monster began to petrify.

Even my dear mother and Duchess Leticia were forced to retreat, and the rest of our forces halted their assault. The spines flew our way as well, only to be intercepted by sparkling, pale-azure barriers—Lady Stella’s Azure Shield! Even so, some broke through, and both Caren and I lost our amulets to them.

The monster lurched free of the snare and into the plaza, still turning everything around it to stone. We were in trouble.

Just ahead of me, Ellie raised her hands without a hint of fear. “I...I’ve...I’ve grown too!” she shouted, shattering the Stinging Sea’s forelegs with a volley of fire, water, earth, wind, ice, light, and dark magic.

Advanced spells of seven elements?!

“Nice going, Ellie,” Caren called. “But...” She blasted a head with eight advanced lightning spells, then impaled it with her spear and Deep Violet! “I won’t give up my spot at Allen’s side!”

“I beg to differ!” Lady Stella cried as a sweep of her Azure Sword sent a frozen head sailing through the air. Only two remained!

I swung my Scarlet Sword at the seventh head with all my might, only to be thwarted by the sudden appearance of several thousand stony spines. While I reeled, the eighth and largest head turned toward me and opened its maw. Light gleamed off more fangs than I could count.

But just when I thought I was done for, my dear mother’s Firebird, Duchess Leticia’s Gale Dragon, and Anna’s strings tore through the monster’s sheltering forest of stone. A greatsword and a longsword plunged into the gaping mouth. It was Lily and my dear brother Richard!

I yelled at the top of my lungs, channeled all my mana into my blade...and finally severed the seventh head!

The final head shot me a hate-filled glare and launched a wild spray of needles from its jaws. A lone figure darted between me and the onslaught, crying, “Lady Lynne!”

“Ellie, no!” I shouted as my best friend scooped me up in her arms, shielding me while she withdrew from the plaza. “Ellie?!”

“I’m fine! Thanks to this!” She showed me a broken and petrified metal plate—the amulet from my dear brother’s father!

“Mmm. Good job, Ellie. You aren’t all bad,” Alice commented via our communication orbs. “You did well, everyone. Now it’s my turn. Hundred Bolts.”

“Thank you all for holding out this long!” Ogi’s voice boomed. “We’re ready to activate the Great Tree’s barrier!”

Eight pillars of pure-white lightning materialized. Then botanical magic beyond any I’d ever seen activated, restraining the Stinging Sea far more effectively than Ellie’s earlier attempt. Even so, the petrification was still slowly but steadily spreading.

“Tina! Dear sister!” I murmured, secure in Ellie’s arms. “Dear brother! The rest is up to you!”



We soared through the beastfolk districts, which were fast becoming a jumble of rocks—due, I presumed, to the power of Stone Serpent. Our allies had apparently dispatched seven of the monster’s eight heads. I could still hardly believe that the Ducal House of Lebufera had marched to our aid.

“Sir, it’s the Great Tree!” Tina shouted, pointing with her rod. “And the monster is stopped in the plaza!”

The Stinging Sea was caught in something like a web of innumerable tree roots and pinned down by eight pillars of white lightning. The former was the Great Tree’s strategic barrier, while the latter... I looked up and saw the Hero, Alice Alvern, with her sword drawn and pale wings unfurled.

“Lydia, Tina,” I said, “take us to the Great Bridge, on the side nearest the tree.”

“Very well.”

“Yes, sir!”

We alighted on the bridge and turned to survey the monster in the plaza. While it hadn’t managed to regrow its lost heads, it showed no signs of giving up the ghost either.

It can withstand the Hero’s magic, meaning it must rival the black dragon. And if it absorbs the Great Tree as well...

I tried to thrust my rod forward but faltered. Lydia’s eyes widened in alarm as she and Tina steadied me.

“Sir,” Tina murmured with obvious concern, “you’re in no shape for fighting.”

Recalling the reclusive witch’s advice yet again, I turned to the nervous, platinum-haired noblewoman and said, “Tina, would you lend me a hand? And please, tie this ribbon to my rod.”

Her eyes went even wider. “Yes, sir! Of course!” she replied, nodding gladly as she accepted the violet ribbon, tied it to my enchanted rod, and touched her own to it.

“I’ll support you,” Lydia added peevishly, squeezing my hand and joining in with her sword.

I closed my eyes and saw Atra’s smiling face.

I know. I’ll live.

I raised my rod before me. Its jeweled tip blazed with splendor as I unleashed the spell that Atra had left me. Layer upon layer of supremely intricate, geometrical formulae took shape, crackling with sparks of electricity in every color of the rainbow.

“Wh-What’s this?!” Tina gasped in surprise.

“It’s gorgeous,” Lydia sighed.

“I hope you’ll never forget this spell,” I said. “This beautiful magic was a parting gift from her—from that kind great elemental. Its name is—”

A deafening roar assaulted my ears. The wind raged and the ground shook as the strategic barrier and the bars of lightning flew apart, and the Stinging Sea resumed its advance. It was on the Great Bridge now.

Alice was temporarily retreating into the sky above the Great Tree.

Lev’s face surfaced then, duplicated countless times over on the remaining serpentine head. They looked down at us and screeched, “HER HOLINESS WILL THE DEATH OF THE WOOORLD!”

The monstrosity sprouted spines from all over its body, anchoring itself in place. Its maw split wide open and began accumulating ashen light.

I felt as though a little hand grasped mine. “Tina! Lydia!” I called.

“Yes, sir!”

“What are you waiting for?!”

We released our magic in a single burst as I finally spoke its name:

“Lightning Flash.”

A blinding light shot across the fallen bridge. Lev fired his gray beam as well, and the two collided! The clash sent up towering columns of water, while the plaza and the far side of the bridge began to petrify.

I bit my lip. My body couldn’t keep up with the spell’s output. Unless I thought of something—

Lydia laid her hand over mine and squeezed tight. “Who do you think is standing next to you?” she demanded. “Don’t stand on ceremony!”

“You have a point!” I conceded and established a truly profound mana link with the highborn crybaby. Pure joy almost overwhelmed me.

Lydia giggled as her fiery wings turned bright white. “Of course I do! You should have done this in the first place!” She flashed me a

fearless grin, and my magical output immediately stabilized.

Our spell started to push back against Lev's beam. Yet it couldn't quite break through!

"Sir!" Tina cried, squeezing my hand with all her might. "I'm...I'm here too! And I wouldn't be if not for you! So...So...!"

"Thank you. Get ready!" I responded, deepening my link with her as well. The young noblewoman's icy wings turned white as snow.

"Sir, y-you ought to take better care of yourself," Tina murmured, tears welling in her little eyes and freezing before they fell. I must have made our connection too strong, allowing her to see what I'd experienced.

"Tiny!" Lydia snapped. "If you're just going to cry, stand aside!"

"I don't need you to tell me that!" Tina shot back, stung out of her gloom. "Please, lend me your strength—the power to protect everyone!"

The marks of Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane began to shine brightly. Streaks of scarlet and azure mingled with Lightning Flash, magnifying its power by orders of magnitude.

"Enough!" the three of us shouted as one.

Lev's many eyes widened in terror as our spell tore through his ashen ray! He only managed to roar one last "HER HOLINESS!" before the flash struck him. A tremendous shock wave made the bridge creak, and the crash must have been audible throughout the eastern capital. Our burst of light went on as far as my eyes could see, piercing through the clouds before it finally vanished.

I lowered my rod and turned to Lydia and the teary-eyed Tina. "Thank you both," I said, severing my links with them. "I could never have done it alone."

"Don't mention it," Lydia replied, sticking her sword in the Great Bridge and hugging my left arm.

"Sir," Tina murmured, downcast. "S-Sir, was...was that magic..."

"That was a great spell, wasn't it?" Lydia finished for her. After how deeply I'd linked with them, the cat was more or less out of the bag.

"Yes," I admitted, "although not quite the same as the ones we've read bedtime stories about. I'll tell you more once— Lydia, let go."

"No," Lydia chirped.

"Tina, help."

"I can't," Tina responded distractedly. "Right now, that's the least of my worries. Please, wait just a little bit longer. Yes, please. I promise I'll put it into words for you." With that, she fell silent.

The spell we'd just cast had been Atra's last bequest to me—one of the true great spells used by her and other beings like her. And what power! I turned to look ahead—and groaned. No trace remained of the

Stinging Sea, or of any building in our line of fire.

Lydia leaned her head on my shoulder. "Well!" she chirped boastfully. "After this, everyone in the kingdom will know *your* name too."

"Why do you sound so glad about that? Good grief."

This was probably the first wartime use of a great spell since the age of strife. I had dreamed of casting one since I was a tiny child. And yet...

"Now, I'd rather have you here with us, Atra."

Without warning, the world changed. Tina and Lydia vanished from my sight, as did everything else around me. I was in a world of white. I knew this sensation—it was just what I'd experienced when Tina had driven Frigid Crane out of control.

"Yes. This is my—our—world," a girl in a white dress informed me. Beautiful avian feathers mingled with her long pale-azure hair.

"Thank you for saving our sister, Atra," added another girl, dressed identically but with radiant scarlet tresses. Her beast ears and tail trembled as she bowed. "I'm sorry for what happened before. Something awful had control of me. And...I wasn't able to help Lydia."

Both girls had clearly lost mana since I'd seen them last, during my battle with Gerard. And most strikingly, their voices were more mature than I had ever heard them before.

"I should be the one to thank you," I said, smiling. "You've been protecting Tina and Lydia, haven't you? I appreciate it. Would you tell me your names, Ms. Frigid Crane and Ms. Blazing Qilin?"

"Our names?" one asked slowly.

"Our true names were taken from us," said the other.

"Taken?" I echoed.

Who could have—

"I see. Then the great spells used in the Continental War, which you call 'imitations,' are really..."

"Power that was stolen from us and twisted, modeled on the Hero's magic."

"Power that killed many people and other creatures."

"But Atra is different, isn't she?" I asked.

The girls nodded, making their tresses glint and glisten.

"She was protected."

"Twin Heavens captured us, but she sheltered us as well."

"I see," I said again. "I have so many more questions for you, but it appears we're short on time."

The white world was already beginning to crumble. I crouched down to match the girls' eye level, and they reached out their little hands to brush my cheeks.

"You gave part of your life for her," said one.

"We can't undo that. It isn't possible," the other continued.

"But..."

"Atra wouldn't want that."

"You're a key."

"A key to break the eternal curse that binds us and the champions. Our hope."

"But please."

"Don't squander your life. You got lucky this time."

"Tina wept, you know?"

"And so did Lydia. 'Waaah, waaah.'"

Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin peered into my eyes.

"Tina is nice but stubborn," said the former. "She cried alone at night, when no one was watching."

"Yes, you're right," I responded.

"Lydia's a crybaby," added Blazing Qilin. "She wailed every day."

"I know."

"They both care so, so much about you," the girls insisted in unison. "So don't die. Live."

Bashfully, I said, "Thank you."

The girls touched my heart then and began to sing.

"I—we are..."

"Undying. Eternal."

"But our memories..."

"Vanish forever once they're gone."

"Still, her feelings are..."

"So very, *very* strong."

Stunned, I murmured, "You can't mean..."

A ray of light shone, and a young fox-clan girl floated down from the heavens. She was small, with long white hair, ears, and tail. Her eyes, however, were golden.

"Atra!" I called her name. "Atra!"

At once, she joyfully threw her arms around me. Her wrists and ankles were free of any mark.

The two other girls, still hand in hand, looked content.

"We worked together..."

"To break that awful curse."

"And Atra will fill in the bits of life you've lost."

"That shouldn't work. It breaks the rules."

"At the same time, Atra has lost much of her strength."

"She'll need time before she can use her power, and..."

"Until it returns..."

"She'll have trouble taking human form."

Atra shifted shape, becoming a little fox cub in my arms.

The girls looked up at me.

“Allen, our dear child.”

“Live with her, the only one of us free. Our dearest wish.”

“And what will become of you?” I asked slowly.

“We won’t lose hope.”

“But the world is vast, and lives are fleeting. The curse won’t be easily broken.”

I stroked the fox cub, nodded to the girls, and said, “In that case, I swear I’ll save you too. You used a lot of your power to keep Tina and Lydia safe and to lift the mark of malediction, didn’t you? You have my word. And this time, I’ll keep it.”

The pair blinked their big eyes. Then they smiled from ear to ear.

“Thank you.”

“I appreciate it. Till we meet again.”

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s meet again.”

With that promise made, I closed my eyes...and the white world crumbled.

“Eek! Where did *you* come from?”

When I opened my eyes, Atra was still in my arms and still a fox cub, and Lydia was gaping at us, startled by her sudden appearance.

“Lydia, this is Atra,” I said. “You ought to recognize her, since we linked mana.”

“She is?” Lydia asked. “Wait a moment. Don’t go anywhere!”

She scooped up Atra, walked a short distance away, deposited the little fox on the ground, and started whispering at her. (“I’m grateful to you for saving him. Thank you for that. But listen up: he’s mine! His embrace is reserved for— What? Y-You slept *in the same bed?!!*”)

I was just sighing at her antics when I received an unexpected hug.

“Tina?” I asked.

“Sir,” she murmured, her hair drooping limply and her big eyes full of tears. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Please forgive me. I shouldn’t have put you through something so frightening.”

“It’s not that! I... I...” Tina stood on tiptoe and touched my cheek, tracing the bloodstains. “I told myself you’d be all right. That you’d sort everything out in no time, and I’d have nothing to worry about. I never dreamed you’d be so badly hurt—that you might have died.” A sob escaped her. “A-Allen, I thought I understood, but I...I...” At that point, Tina’s words gave out. She clung to me and burst into tears.

Just as I lightly reciprocated the young noblewoman’s embrace, several griffins came into view. On their backs rode Stella, Caren, Ellie, and Lynne—all looking ready to leap off at any moment.

“It’s finally over, isn’t it? Thank you for everything,” I said to Lydia, who had returned with Atra. The fox cub perched on my shoulder. “Oh, and I’m prepared for a talking-to.”

“That’s all right, then,” Lydia replied. “Well, no, it’s not, but...it’s fine. Allen...” She circled around in front of me and beamed with the most radiantly joyful smile. “Welcome home.”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s good to be back.”

The scarlet-haired noblewoman giggled merrily. Her platinum-haired peer looked up, sniffled, and said brokenly, “Sir, you’d better take Lydia to task for all her wicked deeds.”

“And what deeds would those be?” I inquired. Although we had linked mana, I’d been too preoccupied to glean any details.

“*Tina!*” Lydia cried frantically and tore the girl—who had finally stopped weeping—away from me. “Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“You lost control worse than anyone,” Tina insisted.

Have they grown a little closer since I last saw them?

Atra rubbed her little head against me.

“Hm?” I said, turning to look over my shoulder. “What’s—”

I stared at the Great Bridge, dyed by the rays of the setting sun. A wolf-clan woman was the first to cross, and she was running toward me. Her kimono was in disarray, and she clearly found the pace taxing...but never, not for one moment, did she stop.

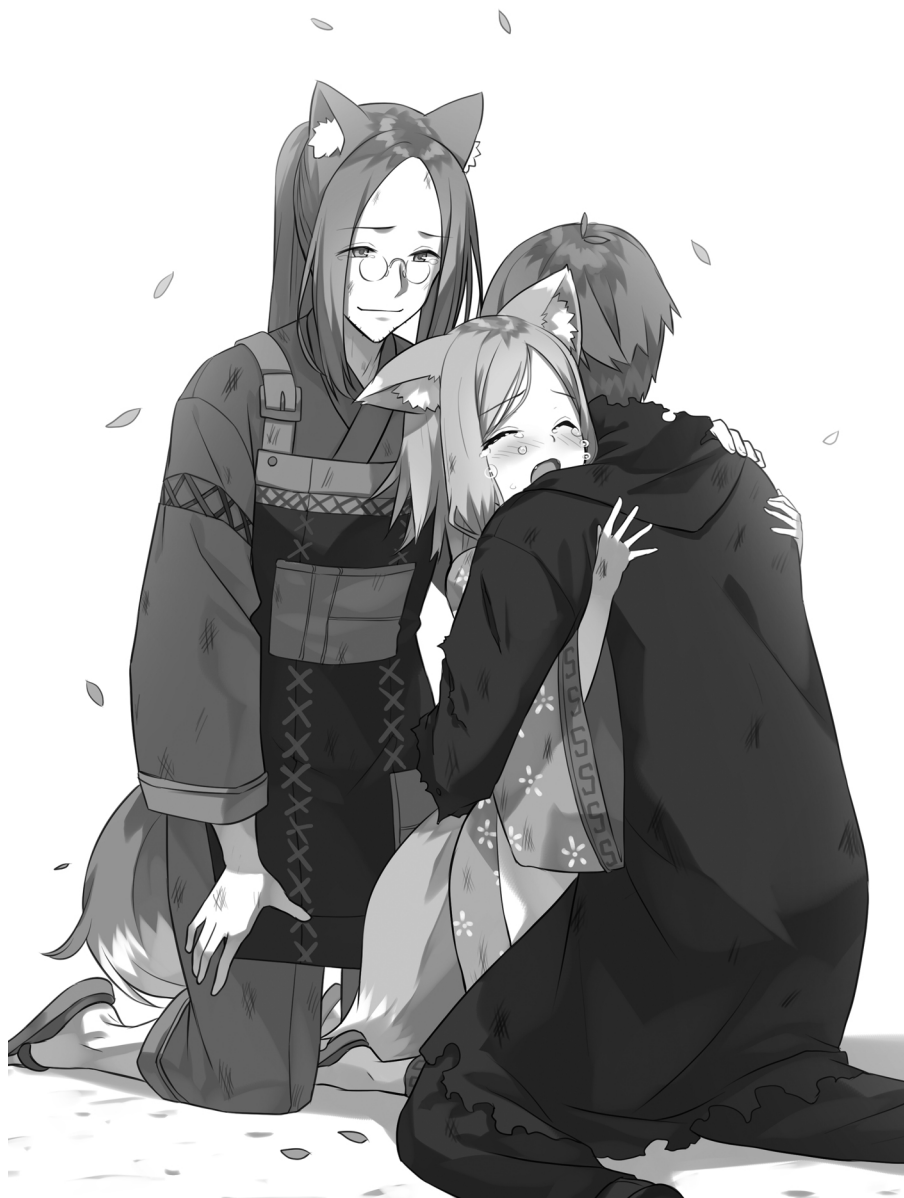
I needed to run to her as well, yet my feet refused to move. Tears blurred my vision as I murmured, “Mom.”

Then the woman—my mother Ellyn—opened her eyes wide, weeping profusely, and cried, “Allen!”

She never slackened her pace until she flung herself on me and squeezed me in her firmest embrace. “Good heavens! How *could* you be so reckless?!” she demanded. Then, haltingly, “O Great Tree, thank you. Thank you so much for bringing back my one and only son in the whole wide world. Thank you. Thank you. Oh, I’m so glad. So very glad.”

“Mom,” I said hesitantly, “I’m sorry.”

My father Nathan arrived a little later, still wearing his smudged work clothes. While mom clung to me and wept, I met his gaze. Dad’s eyes filled with tears too, and he nodded to me over and over again.



“Um... Mother,” Lydia called nervously.

“Excuse us,” Tina added, equally tense.

My mom released me and seized their hands. “Lydia, Tina, my dears,” she said. “Are you both all right? You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Her heartfelt words brought tears to their eyes. Lydia couldn’t even speak, while Tina practically sobbed, “Mother.”

I scooped up Atra in my arms and said with conviction, “It’s good to have you back. I swear I’ll save the others.”

She yipped musically in reply.

Epilogue

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Allen, I’ll just borrow Lady Lydia for a moment,” Anna said, her voice as musical and sprightly as ever.

The request incited a resentful “Hey!” from Lydia, who sat in a chair beside my bed, dressed in her nightgown and hugging the enchanted sword and rod. Her half-lidded glare was more eloquent. “I don’t want to go!” it said. “Tell her no!”

We were in a room of the eastern capital’s largest hospital. Several mana lamps hung on the walls. Beyond the open window, night had fallen, and the moon and stars hid behind clouds. I appreciated the soft breeze.

After slaying the Stinging Sea, I had been carried here against my will and despite my protests. I *had* hoped to join in the reconstruction efforts, but universal opposition had consigned me to a bed—of which there were already too few to go around. The looks I’d received had been...somewhat frightening. Apparently, more than half a month had passed since my abduction.

My parents had accompanied me to the hospital. Not long ago, however, they had returned home to fetch fresh clothes and other necessities.

Atra—still in fox-cub form—had finished her dinner and was currently curled up on my lap, sound asleep. How adorable.

I gave Lydia a pat on the head and said, “Go on. I’m sure Lisa wants to speak with you. You haven’t made her life easy, remember.”

“You won’t go anywhere?” she asked hesitantly.

“Nope. I’ll stay right where I am,” I replied, meeting the noblewoman’s gaze. Lydia seemed to have run herself ragged—not only had she regrettably cut her hair short, but she was emotionally fragile, refusing to leave my side for so much as a moment since the battle. She also appeared to genuinely resent Linaria’s ring.

We stared at each other in silence. Then Lydia abruptly stood, deposited the sword and rod on her chair, and said, “Fine. I’ll admit I put my mother through a lot. That said...” Even though Anna was watching, she gently clasped my hands and touched her head to mine. “You can’t leave my side again. Not ever. I absolutely, positively couldn’t stand it. If anything like this ever happens again, take me with you. If someone tries to tear us apart, I’ll renounce my house and my country. Would you rather go to the city of water or to Lalannoy?”

"All right," I slowly replied. "I promise."

"Truly? You mean it?" Lydia looked at me with teary eyes. The stars emerged from the clouds, and a moonbeam shone into the room.

"I've become painfully aware of how far I have to go. But together, we're unbeatable. Right?"

Her Highness nodded gladly. "Right. I'll be back soon, so leave the door open," she said and left my sickroom.

Anna inclined her head slightly, spread her skirt in an elegant curtsy, and then followed.

Now...

"I thought it was about time you dropped in, Alice," I said.

"Mm-hmm," came a response from the rooftop. Then a stunning platinum-blond-haired girl who wore a timeworn sword beneath her mantle hopped in through the window.

And she didn't even alert Lydia.

"What's that?" I asked, eyeing the paper bag she held.

"A souvenir. I bought it in the royal capital," Alice answered bluntly and moved to my bedside. She proffered me the bag, so I took it from her. It held...

"Pastries from the café with the sky-blue roof? You've eaten there before, haven't you?"

"Mm-hmm. They stayed open through everything. I was impressed."

Her hair was clearly even paler than it had been when we'd battled the black dragon.

"Thank you," I said, setting the bag aside. "Oh, I almost forgot. Alice, this is—"

"The Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals," Alice finished for me.

I guess I can't fool her.

I stroked the fox cub, and she gave a ticklish little shake. The ring on my right hand blinked.

"Twin Heavens left Atra in my care. One day, we'll go to hold a funeral for her."

"I see," the girl said. Her affectionate gaze brought a lump to my throat.

"Alice," I said brokenly, "I wasn't strong enough. I—"

"Hyah." The girl reached out and gave me a soft rap on the head. "My comrade told me the gist of things. Allen, once again, what you've done defies belief. You saved both Twin Heavens' soul and Thunder Fox, you slew the Stinging Sea again, and you averted a threat to the continent. You should be proud. But you've worked too hard. A lot of people cry when you get hurt. Even I feel sad. You're not alone. No matter what, never forget that."

Her words hung in the air for a long moment. At last, I said, "You're right. Thank you."

Alice was kind—too kind for her own good. I wondered if this was what having an elder sister would be like as I took a pastry from the bag and ate it.

"Delicious," I remarked when I was done.

"The best in the world," Alice agreed. "You taught me about them four years ago, when fighting was all I knew. It's the same for Lydia and Tina and Stella and all the rest. You're their star, Allen. Remember that. Not everyone can walk the dark roads alone."

After another long pause, I replied, "True. I won't forget."

"Good." The girl did a twirl, her mantle catching the wind as numinous lights filled the air—the same lights that I'd seen on the invisible stairway. "People can keep forging ahead now, even without gods or beings like me. But I still have unfinished business. I'll clean up after Twin Heavens."

"Alice," I asked slowly, "what *are* those black doors?"

"No. I can't tell you." She shook her head.

Then the answer involves the very roots of the world.

The Hero was the world's protector. Merely having an opportunity to converse with her like this was an exceptional occurrence.

"In that case, would you tell me about the Eight Great Elementals?" I asked, stroking the fox cub. "I know of Blazing Qilin, Frigid Crane, Stone Serpent, Tempest Kingfisher, and Thunder Fox. What are the other three called?"

Alice looked hard at me, then slowly said, "Marine Crocodile, Lunar Cat, and Tenebrous Wolf. Allen, do you—"

"I gave my word," I said, winking. "And it doesn't do to break a promise. Wouldn't you agree?"

She considered briefly before replying, "Mm-hmm. I can't help you directly, and it will be a hard road. But good luck."

"Thank you."

We shared a slight nod. Although we'd spent only a few moments together, I felt at peace.

Alice moved to the window, then looked over her shoulder and announced, "I should go now—I have an old promise to keep. And my comrade is waiting."

I heard a noise from the hallway.

"Thank you again, Alice," I said. "Whatever happens, let's meet again."

"Mm-hmm. See you."

Amid the slanting moonbeams, the girl gave me one last smile and leapt out the window. A shadow flitted past to catch her. A sea-green griffin, white as the driven snow, was flying away eastward with Alice

on its back.

Until we meet again.

Once she was gone, I called to the girl hiding in the corridor.

“Tina, come here.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” answered the young noblewoman. Dressed in her nightgown, and with her hair hanging limp, she plodded diffidently to my bedside.

“So, you and Ellie have been busy,” I said casually. “Stella told me all about your great accomplishments.”

“I...I was...so full of myself,” Tina said, her eyes full of tears. “I’m no good at all.”

She’s brilliant—but far too harsh on herself.

“You aren’t alone in that, Tina,” I said, gently coaxing. “I’m just as bad. I took too much on myself and made a great many people cry. And I still know next to nothing about Frigid Crane, Blazing Qilin, Thunder Fox, and the other great elementals. About all I do know”—I gently stroked Atra—“is that they aren’t what legends make them out to be. I’ll need to do a lot more research, but I swear I’ll keep at it until I find a way to liberate Frigid Crane.”

Tina kept silent for a moment. Then, “Together,” she said, placing her own hands over the one I had on Atra. “I don’t want you to work alone, Allen; I want to be right there with you. I couldn’t bear it any other way.” There was nothing childish about the way she looked at me.

Girls grow up so quickly. How am I supposed to compete?

“You’re right,” I said. “Let’s work on it together.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Tina and I shared a look and then a smile.

Ellie, Lynne, Stella, and Caren—all dressed for bed—then poked their heads in at my sickroom door. Although they held their peace, I knew exactly what they wanted to ask: “What about us?”

Lydia strolled right on in and declared, “He won’t be needing any of you—not when he has *me*. Isn’t that right? Hurry up and nod!”



That unruly lock of Tina's hair snapped to attention. She wheeled round, pointed her finger at the haughty Lady of the Sword, and exclaimed, "So, you've shown yourself, Lydia the crybaby! My comrade told me all I need to know, so you'd best be prepared! And don't forget, we beat you once already!"

"Yes, yes. Talk is cheap," Lydia replied, with an airy wave of her hand. Her eyes were smiling.

"O-Only one 'yes'!" Tina snapped.

"Oh, L-Lady Tina," Ellie nervously chimed in. Then, all at once, my sickroom was in an uproar.

"Dear brother, I have so much to tell you as well."

"How do you feel, Mr. Allen? I could cast a healing spell to—"

"You already cast a bunch earlier, Stella."

I see now. I've come home to where I belong.

While Lydia and Tina enjoyed their verbal sparring match, a feeling of tranquility washed over me.



"Why, if it isn't Edith."

East of the Wainwright Kingdom, sandwiched between the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit and the Lalannoy Republic, lay the beating heart of the church—the pontiff's domain. I was striding through the vast stone corridors of its innermost sanctum—forbidden to all but apostles and a select few of the faithful—when a voice called out from behind me. I turned to see a man dressed in the pure-white robe with crimson trim that marked the true apostles.

"Raymond," I said, stopping to give him a suspicious frown. "Or should I call you Apostle Ibush-nur now? I thought you'd left for Lalannoy."

"And I thought you'd left as well. Were you not assigned to reinforce the city of water?"

"I blundered at Rostlay," I replied stiffly. "I must take responsibility."

"You never change. Now, let us proceed. Our leader awaits."

I hesitated a moment before saying, "Yes." I felt fear yet also an irrepressible excitement. And why not? We were about to look upon our one and only mistress, the living Saint.

The pontiff, head of the Church of the Holy Spirit, was revered as practically divine in the knightdom and in the other neighboring countries as well. His influence far surpassed any head of state. Yet the current pontiff, Theobald III, prostrated his aged body in this flower garden at the heart of the Palace of the Holy Spirit, delivering

his report just as we were.

“I failed to anticipate that the Algrens had grown so feeble,” he was saying. “I am overcome with shame that I was unable to obtain the holy blade—and that which it seals away—from the royal capital, and the most ancient bud of the east’s Great Tree.”

“We share the blame,” I added.

“We acquitted ourselves disgracefully and squandered the gift of Your Holiness’s prophecy,” said Ibush-nur.

A figure in a hooded robe of pristine white turned from the flowers she had been touching. She was a girl of sublime beauty, with long grayish-white hair and flawless skin. This was the living Saint, the only authority to whom we would answer. We prostrated ourselves even more deeply before her.

“Worry not,” Her Holiness declared. “I have received the most ancient bud of the royal capital’s Great Tree, as well as the heart of the monstrous Stinging Sea, ancient and forbidden books necessary to recreate the true Resurrection, remains from the Royal Academy’s catacombs, and beastfolk chieftains versed in botanical magic, along with their children. Even the disgraced Wainwright prince is in my hands. We are well equipped to take another step forward. I hear that Sir Gaucher, Junior Apostles Racom and Rolog, and even Lev have martyred themselves. See that any family they have is well rewarded, and do the same for all others martyred in the course of this endeavor. Edith, Ibush-nur, you have labored tirelessly as well. I accept all blame for your failures.”

I trembled, too overcome with emotion to speak. Her Holiness had committed the name of every martyr to memory.

“Oh, what boundless compassion! We are unworthy,” exclaimed the aged pontiff. “I envy our martyred brethren with all my heart.”

Her Holiness plucked a flower and murmured sorrowfully, “My sins are grave. I have sent so many to their deaths—albeit in the name of a worthy cause, the restoration of the great spell Resurrection. I must apologize to all the fallen when they rejoin the living. But not now, not yet. I beseech you, please continue to lend me your aid.”

“Always!” we answered in unison, our resolve renewed.

My next duty would bring me to the city of water—the core of the League of Principalities, the oldest mortal city, and the legendary site of the water dragon’s advent. There, I would redeem myself for my disgrace at Rostlay.



The old man and the apostles had left the courtyard, and not even they would be able to reenter it—I had already redeployed layers of strategic barriers. I, the living Saint of the Church of the Holy Spirit,

was alone.

I ran my fingers over the covers of several forbidden tomes—newly retrieved—which lay on a small table. *A Record of Certain Matters of Grave Import to the Royal Family* was marked secret with the fading seals of Crom and Gardner. One slender volume bore the scrawled title *Findings on Ten-Day Fever* and the name of its author—Millie Walker. The ancient book with the deep-green cover was *Concerning the World Tree*, author unknown. *Shooting Star at War* recorded the wolf-clan champion's exploits in the War of the Dark Lord. An insignia in the shape of a crescent moon occupied one corner of its front cover. The final volume was a battered notebook, stained black in places with what I knew to be blood. Gently, I picked it up.

"Sis," I murmured, cradling my late elder sister's notebook. Then, hugging it to my chest, I danced alone beside the pond, amid the profusion of blooming flowers. "This time, I got eeeverything I wanted!" I sang. "I even released the Thunder Fox *right on schedule*! The kingdom will have its hands full for a whiiile now! Even when the war's behind them, will they be in any state to campaign abroad, I wonder? And I finished sweeping up the church's brainless worker bees! Martyrdom, martyrdom, and more martyrdom! So..." I chuckled to myself by the little pond, holding the flower I'd picked earlier. "I'd better have some fun in Lalannoy while I've got the chance. But first, the city of water! Oh, they're all such silly little fools! No one in the world can play this game against me!"

I traced a name in a report, almost mad with fondness and nostalgic longing.

Allen.

"I wonder if he'll catch on to me," I mused. "I *did* send that oaf Lev to say hello. What will he do if he does realize? Oh, I can't wait!"

I crushed the flower in my hand. The bits that slipped through my fingers were withered.

"But if he gets in my way—if he tries to stop me tearing down this rotten, godless world—then he'll get no mercy from me. Shooting Star may have come again and reminded the world of his light..."

Around me, all the flowers began to wither and die. The water's surface reflected grayish-white beast ears and a bushy tail. My eyes turned crimson as the mark of Stone Serpent spread over my right hand and cheek. Hugging the notebook, I whispered to the old pendant that hung around my neck:

"But every shooting star falls to earth in the end. Don't you think so too, Big Sis Atra?"



Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been another four months, and thanks to all of you, I made it to volume eight—the end of part two. I'd say it has an unusual setup for a light novel these days, wouldn't you? I mean, the hero became a “damsel in distress” partway through. One of *Private Tutor's* strengths is that it's never short of characters who move the story forward.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although, as usual, about ninety percent of it is new material. I also touched up almost everything I didn't outright add—but it all still counts as revision.

As far as the story goes, I think I managed to cover everything I wanted to include in part two. I showed all the leading ladies' strengths and weaknesses, as well as their growth (a certain scarlet crybaby excluded). I explored history and the feelings and regrets of those who survived it—even if they might wish they hadn't. And Allen took his first step forward of his own free will.

Two things surprised me:

- The vice commander of the royal guard rose to new heights each volume.
- Saint Wolf matured at a breakneck pace.

I set things in motion and let my characters do the rest, and they blew away my expectations.

Hm? What about Lily, you ask? I suspect she'll start coming into her own in the next volume.

Announcement time! *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha (The Mentor in a Frontier City)* is getting a manga adaptation drawn by Hidaka. I'd like to keep writing it alongside *Private Tutor*, so I hope you'll give it a look!

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. Thank you for helping me through yet another volume.

The illustrator, cura. Your gorgeous artwork keeps me motivated. I look forward to working with you on volume nine and beyond.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. In the next volume, expect mopping up, trysts, and schemes.

Riku Nanano

8

Author

Riku Nanano

Illustrator

cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Second Coming of Shooting Star
and the Final Showdown in
the Eastern Capital





“Now, let’s put
an end to this
rebellion!”

The great elemental Thunder Fox

Atra

A young girl Allen encountered
in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea.
She guides him deeper into
the ancient tower.

Private tutor to the dukes’ daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate
his own unrivaled control of magic.
He was confined to a ruin but came
face-to-face with an ancient legend
in its depths.

Private Tutor to the 8 Duke’s Daughter



“W-We
teleported
from the royal
capital!”

Ellie

“Now, charge!”

Stella

“Look there!”

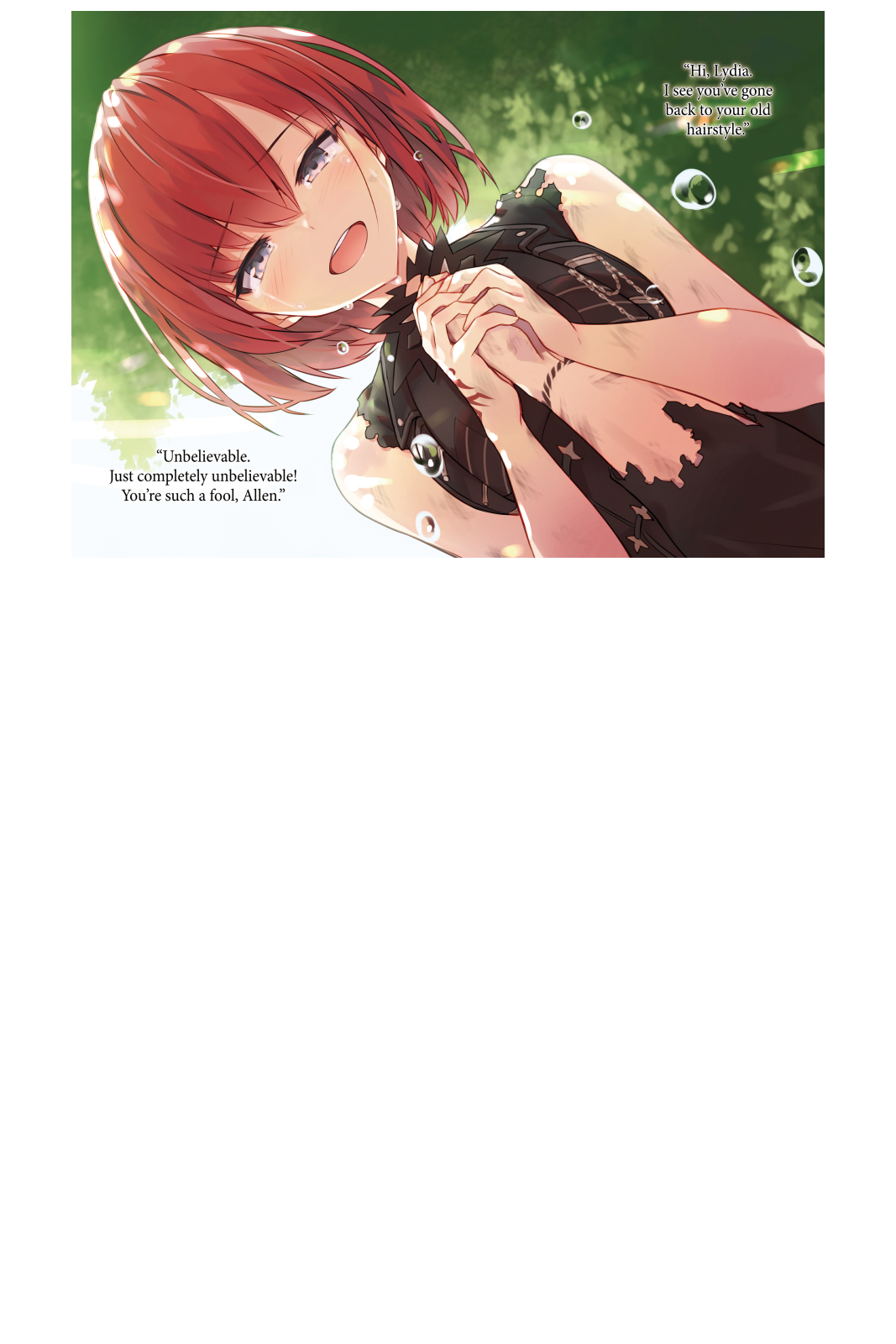
Tina

“Luce! It’s me!
I came back!”

Caren

“Incredible...”

Lynne



“Hi, Lydia.
I see you’ve gone
back to your old
hairstyle.”

“Unbelievable.
Just completely unbelievable!
You’re such a fool, Allen.”



“Enough!”

Streaks of scarlet and
azure mingled with Lightning Flash,
magnifying its power by orders of magnitude.
Our spell tore through Lev's ashen ray...
and struck him!

Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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by Riku Nanano

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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